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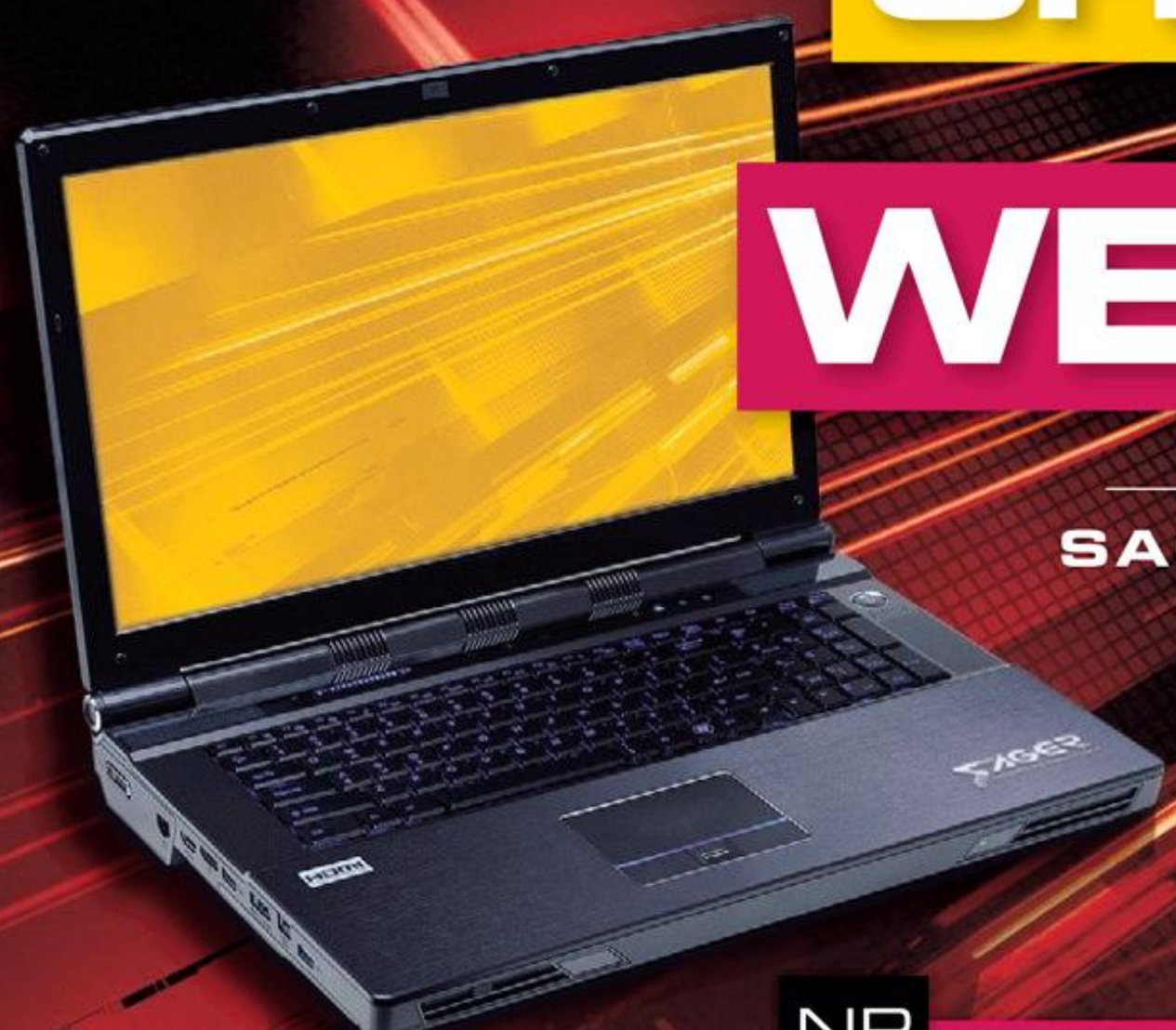

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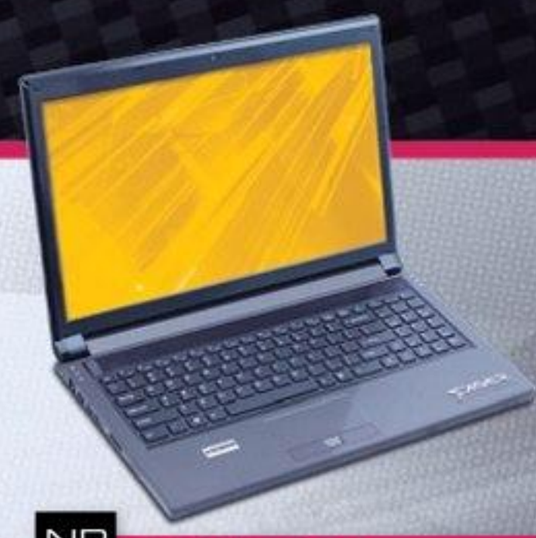

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#227 JUNE 2012

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There's a dull, dry snap as I strike the window, which collapses inwards. Light streams from the ragged hole, strikes my chest and runs down to the floor. I'm shoved backwards by the impact, and I watch the light from the adjacent room fill up the basement, and as it does the empty buckets disappear, the stacks of bricks vanish, the legs of the workbench become transparent and then fade away altogether. The light rises up the walls and floral wallpaper rises with it. I'm lying on the carpet of the drawing room now, looking through the window at a dim basement.

Endtroversy

Has the conclusion of a PC game ever been as controversial as the ending to *Mass Effect 3*? Some gamers were infuriated that a series of roleplaying games that consistently emphasized player choice and narrative consequences would conclude with a rigid and relatively narrow set of options. Others found the ending fitting, tough-minded, and elegiac. Some petitioned BioWare to provide a conclusion that hewed closer to their expectations from the series; others were horrified by the idea of gamers injecting themselves into the creative process after development had finished. (You can hear an airing of all the arguments on episode 310 of the *PC Gamer* Podcast at http://bit.ly/endtroversy, but beware—it's chock full of spoilers!)

It's a testament to BioWare's profound achievement over the course of these three games that fans felt so invested in its world that they were willing to fight over the denouement. But the fight got a little nasty. That's what former *PC Gamer* Editor-in-Chief Gary Whitta called, on our podcast, the "growing pains" of a new creative medium. I can't think of a better way to describe it. Because the discussion between groups of fans, the games press, developers, and BioWare itself is a discussion about what games are, and what our relationship to them is when we're playing them.

We're going to be wrestling with these questions for years, if not decades. But even as we do, let's not forget that this debate is really about beginnings, not endings. It's about, as Gary put it, the birth of a new medium. And it's our disagreements over the relationship between artist and audience—the same ones that took place as we struggled to metabolize the new experiences brought to us by abstract art, photography, and film —that ultimately prove one indisputable point: videogames have become a permanent fixture in our culture, a part of the larger struggle to understand ourselves and each other.

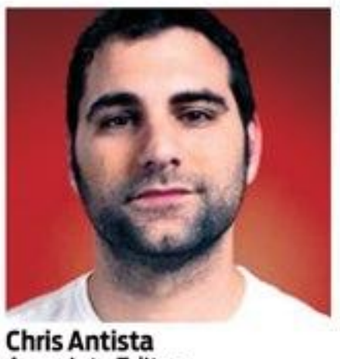
LOGAN DECKER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Twitter: @logandecker

PLAYLIST

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
Is it weird I put 30 hours into *ME3* multiplayer before I touched the campaign? It's a wonderfully designed survival mode.

Josh Augustine
Associate Editor
Throw beer. Drink beer. Meditate on beer. *WoW*'s hooked me again with the *Mists of Pandaria* beta and its Brewmaster Monks.

Tyler Wilde
Associate Editor
Sad that *Mass Effect 3* is over, I now spend my nights wandering the *Normandy* hoping someone will talk to me. They won't.



Chris Antista
Associate Editor
My *Tribes: Ascend* skills are improving slower than I'd like, but getting constantly murdered is half the fun.

PC GAMER (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus Holiday issue following December issue by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Periodicals postage paid in San Bruno, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Basic subscription rates (12 issues) US: Digital $23.88; Print $19.95; Canada: Digital $23.88; Print $29.95; Intl: Digital $23.88; Print $39.95. Canadian and foreign orders must be prepaid, US funds only. Canadian price includes postage and GST #R128220688. PMA #40612608. Subscriptions do not include newsstand only specials. **POSTMASTER**: Send changes of address to PC Gamer, PO Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Standard Mail Enclosure in the following edition: None. Ride-Along Enclosure in the following editions: None. Returns: Pitney Bowes, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2, Canada. Future US, Inc. also publishes @Gamer, Crochet Today!, Your Knitting Life, MacLife, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, The Official Xbox Magazine, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, and Windows: The Official Magazine.

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GUILD WARS 2 42

From feeding cows to killing giant swamp demons, the return to Tyria's enormous world could renew your faith in the MMO genre.

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Teamwork, tactics, and lots of stats!

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Your emails, Facebooks, Tweets, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

- Sad that cross platform play was removed from *CS:GO*. I was really looking forward to showing console-kiddies the meaning of pwnage. ***Ruralgeek***
- BioWare misspelled "hidden DRM" as "War Assets." ***Janne Joakim Raita***
- I like the risky GUI of Windows 8. It's certainly more interesting than the "desktop" paradigm. ***Charlie Seto***
- Has *Hawken* coined the term "mechgasm" yet? ***John L. Hardin***
- Quite excited for *Assassin's Creed III*'s new setting, although, not necessarily for a "Yay America!" theme. ***Rizal M. Ridzuan***
- Been dying to play a real *SimCity* again for a while. Looking angrily at you, *Societies*... ***Patrick Sweeny***
- Why does every great game license have to be turned into an online game? I'm still hoping for a singleplayer *MechWarrior* game. ***Shayne Shepherd***
- Cheers to Firaxis for doing *X-Com* right! Nobody wanted some weird FPS anyway. ***The Gnord***

Are you Prothean or Antithean?

Cash effect

There's been a lot of backlash against the *From Ashes* DLC for *Mass Effect 3*. I understand the complaints: they're selling a Prothean squadmate, which you could see as being fairly important to the lore. However, while some claim BioWare's ripping content out of the game and selling it for more money, I see it as optional content that'll provide a more personal feel to the backstory than what we'd learn in the game alone.
Josh Shearer

Lord of the Rings *fans probably would've complained if Peter Jackson released the* Extended Editions *the same day as the theatrical cut, so we get it. However, while those scenes were shot at the same time, they were later cut in to enhance the final product. Day 1 DLC can feel like a bit of a gouge, but in* Mass Effect 3*'s case, BioWare has gone on record stating that* From Ashes *was developed by a separate team while the core of* ME3 *was being finalized. It's not crucial to the main meat of the game, it's included with the* Deluxe Edition, *and you can buy it separately at your leisure. Keyword: optional!* **PCG**

X-commendation

I almost peed myself when I read your preview for *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. I love *X-Com*! Normally, I try not to get too excited, but Sid Meier's name attached to anything is reason enough to be giddy. First *MechWarrior Online*, then a new *Jagged Alliance*, and now this? I'm drowning in nostalgia!
Shane Reagan

These are certainly exciting times, Shane. It looks as if the dust of corporate acquisition is settling, and some of our favorite PC franchises of yore are finally getting readdressed by their current owners. Better still, games like Enemy Unknown *show that publishers are taking the fan feedback seriously. It's like 2K's saying, "So, while you're waiting to see if our shooter reboot pans out, here: enjoy the game the way you prefer to remember it."*
PCG

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

THE HOT MAIL

Let's get Kickstarted in here

This whole Kickstarter thing is very exciting, and it's got me thinking about other ways it might be leveraged. A full-on, AAA title is probably way beyond the financial bounds of crowd sourcing, but what about something a little more manageable? Like, say, DLC? I know I've loved several big-budget games over the years that quit making DLC before I was ready to quit buying it. I would've loved a new mission for *Just Cause 2*, or a new area for *Mirror's Edge*, or something—*anything*—new for *Burnout: Paradise*. If someone like Rocksteady said, "Hey, we've got some neat ideas for *Arkham City* that we wanted to try out, but we're out of money and need to move to something else. If we can get $XXX in a month, we'll be able to divert a small team to make that happen." I'd pay sight unseen.
Dave Talbert

More, please?

Great point, Dave! Schafer's grassroots effort shot a blunt message across the industry's bow: players can now circumvent risk-averse publishers by paying upfront for what they want. Revisiting games that never got a fair shake should be easier than ever, though we don't expect EA to get in on the trend.

Your feedback at *PC Gamer* is much beloved, so Dave's getting a copy of *Alan Wake* for his crowdsourcing dreams. Ping us at letters@pcgamer.com with a question, comment, or rage-fueled rant to earn your chance to win next month's **PRIZE OF MYSTERY**!

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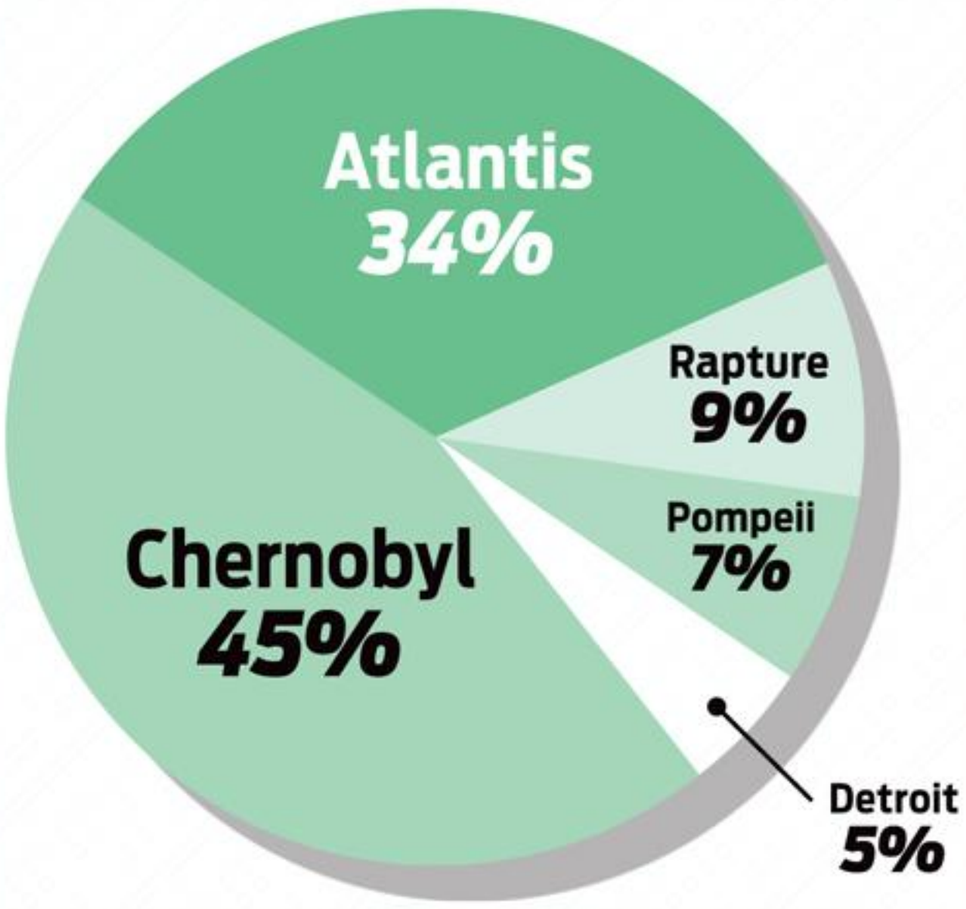
PC GAMER POLL

Which failed city would you like to restore in SimCity?



How could you possibly think that?

True *STALKER* brothers vote Chernobyl. ***Michael Radnan***

Only if it's the underwater Atlantis with mermaids and sea creatures. ***Gabriél Troché***

Chernobyl. Just for the creepy Ferris wheel. ***Josh Kristof***

You forgot Cleveland. ***Jon Alexander***

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BACK CHATTER

- Keeping an eye on *Game of Thrones*. I'd really like an RPG with choice and consequences that don't involve throwing lightning bolts. ***BlackCompany***
- The lack of Elcor should bring down your *Mass Effect 3* review score 40 percent. ***Lt Scrooge***
- Medal of Honor: Literal Title ***Ben Alouisious W***
- Honestly, *Guild Wars 2* is truly the only MMO I'm looking forward to. ***Ramboness***
- I'm pining for a new *Rainbow 6*, although one more like the original and not a theatrically scripted action game. ***Jim Strebeck***
- Who plays *Diablo* for the PvP in the first place? That option will never be used on my machine. ***Geobaldi***
- Anyone over the age of four could distinguish between *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* and Mojang's *Scrolls*. Common sense wins! ***Chumbaniya***

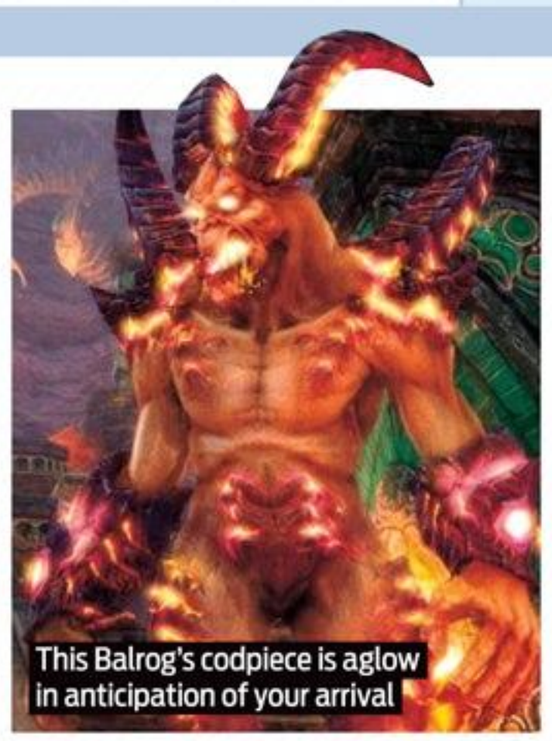
Back to Auraxis

You guys got me really excited for *PlanetSide 2*! Thanks for the beta key—It sounds like a game made just for me! However, I'd like to know how SOE will maintain order in it? Will there be an all-powerful dictator whose gigantic mega-brain will decide all of our actions, or will there be a ranking system similar to the real military? ***Dan Lachman***

That's the potential beauty of PlanetSide 2*—SOE wants to empower players to shape the game with their actions, tactics, and organization. It's a risky approach to create something so non-linear—you're relying on players to be your content, not enemies or quests that you can test and tweak. They'll need to design clever ways of accommodating "lone wolf" players who don't communicate or work with their faction. Either way, we hope that a persistent battlescape, where the players tip the balance, is something that an FPS can pull off successfully.* **PCG**

The Rift that keeps on giving

Where's the *Rift* love?! I've been playing for about a year and it's an absolute blast. The new *Ember Isle* expansion is awesome, plus advancement


This Balrog's codpiece is aglow in anticipation of your arrival

after level 50 via Planar Attunement is a great idea that works well. It's really hard to get bored with new world events coming out constantly. I bet if you reviewed it again now, it would get a 95 percent!

One of the fantastic things about MMOs is their ability to grow and improve post-launch, which is why we tend to go back and examine them time and time again. Rift *recently hit its one year anniversary and we're still busy running around Telara catching up on all the improvements, collecting innocent squirrel tears all the while. (Don't tell Logan!)* **PCG**

Shooters at war

Modern FPS games out there including *Battlefield 3* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* began as World War II shooters but shifted to the modern era as interest in WWII games seemed to fade. We have more variety on the PC (*Red Orchestra 2*, *Tribes Ascend*, *Planetside 2*) but for the industry in general developers and publishers seem more interested in pumping out modern warfare shooters. Do you think people will become sick of these and developers will start avoiding them like they do WWII shooters nowadays? ***Frank Ayers***

Successful shooters inevitably spawn competitors and imitators, which contributes to a flood of marketing hype, which broadens the interest in the genre and setting, thus spawning more competitors and imitators, and so on. But as you've already noted, you can always depend on PC developers to give us shooters of nearly endless variety—from historical conflicts to brawlers to jetpack-fueled skirmishes—regardless of fads and trends. **PCG**

Back to the classics.

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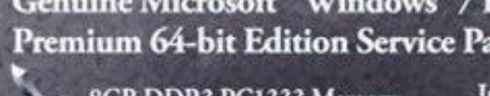

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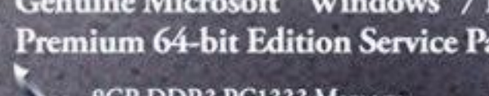

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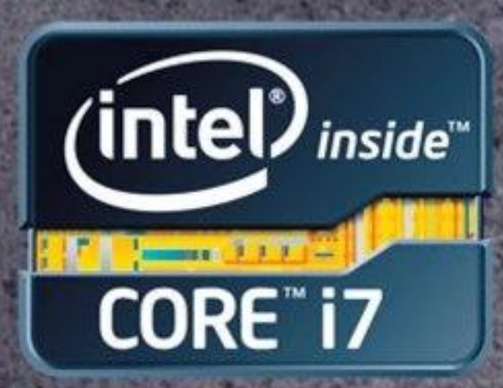

MechWarrior reboots

THE BIG STORY First screenshots and new info on the stompy robots' free-to-play return

It's been 10 years since the last entry in the main *MechWarrior* series, but now the beloved robot simulation is coming back. It's free-to-play and powered by the very modern CryEngine 3 but, as the first screenshots show, there's a lot that's familiar.

Although *MechWarrior* is a first-person game about battling robots, the series has always been more about tactics and cockpit switches than twitch accuracy. *MechWarrior Online* sets those battles in a parallel timeline; in game, the date 15 April, 2012 is really 15 April, 3049. Each day that ticks off in our world advances the *MechWarrior* universe by a day.

That universe is split into Core Worlds and Faction Worlds. Major story events will take place in the Core, on planets controlled by the developers. Faction Worlds are more interesting though, as they can be captured and give bonuses to players and their teammates. Developer Piranha Games is hoping to create a universe in which players form corporations—*MechWarrior*'s equivalent to guilds—and where territorial control of regions ebbs and flows in a similar way to *EVE Online*.

The game will be free-to-play, but Piranha is adamant that it won't include any "pay-to-win" items. If you want to advance through your BattleMech tech tree or up your corps' abilities, you'll need to win matches and earn Loyalty points. Those points can then be used to pay for Pilot Skills training or new modules for your metal beasts. Real money will be used to buy vanity items, or to expand the breadth of your options without expanding your power.

From what we know so far, it sounds a lot like *World of Tanks* in terms of the game's structure. You're not going to be spending time trekking from one frontline to another, but instead hopping directly into skirmishes. The persistent world exists in terms of the universe map and your own mech's abilities.

MechWarrior Online is due out later this year, and you can find more information at *mwomercs.com*. ■

Graham Smith

We've already registered the name Hulk_Smash

Hmm.. lasers, lasers, or lasers?

You can join one of the Great Houses or play as a lone wolf.

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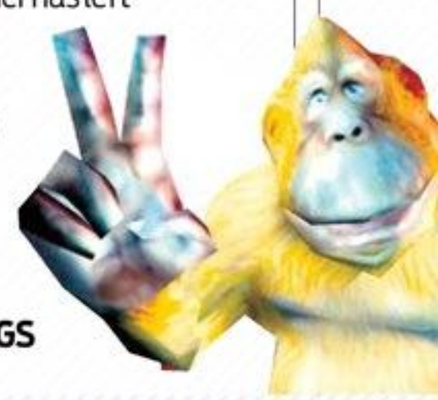
MONITOR

MOLYNEUX MOVES ON

RESTART GAME DESIGN LEGEND LEAVES LIONHEAD TO START NEW DEVELOPMENT COMPANY

Peter Molyneux founded Bullfrog and Lionhead Studios, led the teams to create *Populous*, *Dungeon Keeper*, *Theme Park*, *Black & White*, and *Fable*, and sold both companies for huge sums. He also invented dogs (*www.bit.ly/pcgdogs*). Now he's going to try to repeat his success a third time. The venerable game designer has left Lionhead, which was bought by Microsoft in 2006, to found 22 Cans, a new development studio with Lionhead's former chief technology officer Tim Rance. There's no information on what they're working on yet, but we'd guess they'll make some games. **GS**



IGF WINNERS ANNOUNCED

GRRRR INDIE CLASSIC WINS AWARD AMID CONTROVERSY

The winners of the Independent Games Festival have been revealed at this year's GDC in San Francisco. Puzzle platformer *Fez* won the Seamus McNally Grand Prize—an early prototype won the Excellence in Visual Design award in 2008, and its inclusion this year prompted criticism of the festival's judging process. Previous winners will be discouraged from resubmitting their games in the future. **GS**

HEALTH BAR

SORTING GOOD NEWS FROM BAD

Winners

Skyrim
Won Game of the Year at Games Developers Choice awards.

Borderlands 2
Claptrap has promised better PC optimization for his next appearance.

Diablo III
Blizzard cut PvP from the launch and announced a March 15 release date.

Psychonauts 2
No *Psychonauts* sequel funding was arranged at GDC.

Steam Box rumors
No, Valve is not making a console. Move along now.

***Mass Effect 3*'s ending**
Not the controversy—we're just sad it's over. Savor it if you still can.

Faildogs

All the best players go into management in the end.

Counter-Strike's cArn retires

One of the world's greatest pro gamers logs out

Patrik "cArn" Sättermon will be remembered as one of the world's most successful *Counter-Strike* players. The Swede has a wealth of top-tier tournament finishes on his résumé, stretching across more than half a decade of playing *CS 1.6* at a professional level.

cArn announced his retirement from professional tournament play just prior to March's Intel Extreme Masters World Championship finals in Hanover. We caught up with him to find out what one of the *CS* scene's leading lights is planning to do next, and how he sees eSports progressing.

Why have you decided to retire from competitive play?
I simply figured it was about time to move on with my life. I have been a professional gamer since 2004 and everything that has a beginning has an end. I have moved to Taipei, and plan to stay around Fnatic and become a player manager.

As one of eSports' comparatively "older" players, have you had trouble keeping up with younger players?
To be honest, it's difficult. Reflexes and precision decline after turning 25, so eventually you are leaning more on your experience and knowledge of the game to get out on top of your opponents by time.

What was the hardest thing about being a competitive player?
All the sacrifices you have to make to stay on top. Practice consumes up to 10 hours per day prior to a big tournament, so family, friends and education suffer. Overall, everything has been worth it: the people and the places I have had the chance to see has paid back all the hard hours of practice, big time.

Where does *CS* go next?
I wish I had a great answer to that. I'm divided knowing we are struggling to attract new players. We can't simply compete against companies like Riot, who put a lot of effort into marketing their game globally.

How would you maintain eSports' current rise in popularity?
Working hard, simple as that. We are very big right now, but also very small. You can say we are in our own small bubble which is yet to pop and become mainstream. We should learn from the mistakes in the past, and work hard to be role models and sportspeople that young people can admire. ■ ***Rich McCormick***

BAD BOSS BATTLES

SORRY *DEUS EX: HR'S* DEVELOPERS APOLOGIZE FOR THEIR MISTAKE

Square Enix game designer Francois Lapikas apologized at GDC for *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s notorious boss fights. "We are truly sorry," he said, explaining that the battles weren't put in until late in the game's development. "We figured by putting enough ammo in the room, we would be fine and could move on. Next time we'll think about them more. They were a big part of the game and we should have put more effort into them." **CT**

SCROLLS FIGHT SETTLED

FRIENDSHIP MOJANG AND BETHESDA'S LAWYERS MAKE UP

In a short post on the Mojang blog, CEO Carl Manneh announced, "We have settled the lawsuit over *Scrolls*, and Mojang and Bethesda are friends again." The disagreement initially arose when Mojang attempted to register the name of its upcoming card dueling RPG as *Scrolls*, which Bethesda saw as an infringement on its trademark for *The Elder Scrolls*. The settlement allows Mojang to keep the name, but gives the trademark to Bethesda—and Mojang is also barred from using the name for any future game, including a sequel. More on Mojang's upcoming card game can be found at scrolls.com. **PS**

LOL OF THE MONTH

TRIBES' LLAMA DRAMA

Tribes: Ascend players know that the only thing more heart-wrenching than a dead CGI child is a llama grab. Developer Hi-Rez shows the poignant impact of llama-grabbing—slow-moving players grabbing the game's pivotal flag in vain attempts to get it back to their home base—by sending up last year's much-discussed *Dead Island* trailer: starting with a dead soldier before showing his clumsy capture attempt in flashback, complete with sad music and slow motion reverse-o-death. Tears await at: *bit.ly/loltribes*.

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"Arrows for sale. Get your arrows here."

Retail still matters

The success of *The Witcher* shows that the worldwide rise of digital is not inevitable

With many retailers having relegated PC games to sequestered shelf space, you'd be forgiven for thinking that digital distribution has become the dominant market force.

Not according to Martin Iwinski, joint CEO of CD Projekt RED, developers of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*. During his GDC talk about the success of his game, he presented some surprising sales figures.

Since its May 2011 release, *The Witcher 2* has sold over 1.1 million copies, but digital sales only account for 24 percent. The bulk—around 836,000 units—was shifted by retail stores.

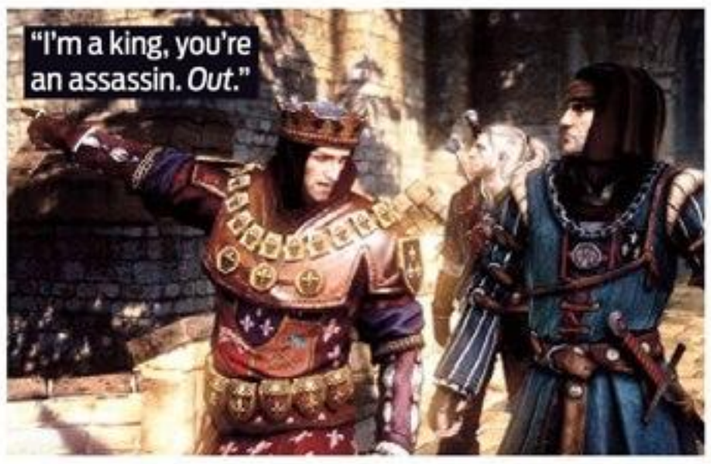
The reason, he claimed, was the popularity of the sequel in Eastern Europe, where retail is still dominant. In North America, sales leaned toward the digital market. 70 percent of the 270,000 US copies shifted were sold digitally.

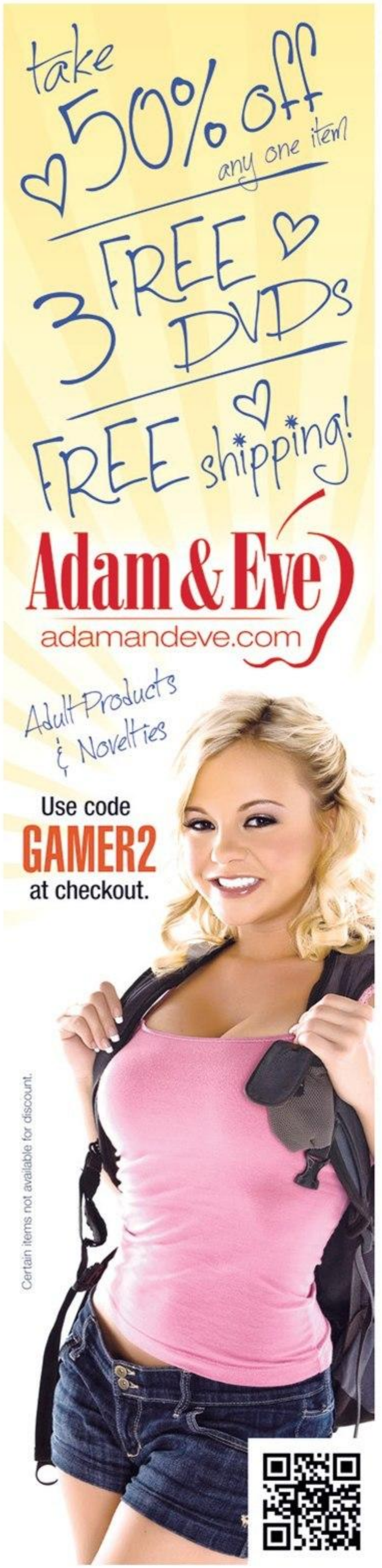
But as you move east, the number of players buying their games through the traditional retail market increases. As a result, the combined digital sales figure of the rest of the world was only 81,000 copies. Given that Russia and Poland were the second and third biggest markets, buying a combined total of 420,000 copies, that's a huge win for boxes on shelves.

These figures are a direct contrast to the statement Paradox Interactive's CEO Frederik Wester made at E3 last year, claiming that 90 percent of Paradox's sales were digital and that "retail sales are like a bonus for us now. We don't really need retailers any more and that is a release, because retailers have not been good for the industry."

Clearly they have been good for CD Projekt RED. Iwinski has promised that going forward, every customer will be treated like a legitimate customer, regardless of how they buy the game. Speaking to *Joystiq*, he said, "We will never use any DRM. It's just over-complicating things." He shared a similar message with *PC Gamer* late last year: "DRM does not work...it will be cracked in no time. Plus, the DRM itself is a pain for your legal gamers." ■ *Graham Smith*

This band is huge in Russia right now.


"I'm a king, you're an assassin. *Out*."



THE SPY

The Spy cannot reveal his sources, or let them live.

In the Spy's line of work—primarily spying—it pays to be able to pass a lie detector test. That's why in 1963 he underwent a painful six week procedure to deaden his skin's galvanic response, one of the primary metrics used by a polygraph.

It's why he uses two pacemakers and a wolf's heart to maintain a perfectly regular pulse in every situation. It's why he had his skull shielded with a layer of nickel to block the magnetic resonance imaging that's used to detect brain activity. And it's why he spent most of 1978 repeatedly telling a Bolivian marmoset that it was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. So that he could lie without mercy, without pause, without hesitation or biometrically detectable stress. It's also why he doesn't really care if Valve makes a Steam Box.

Rumors that Valve is planning a standardized, living-room PC exploded when a journalist wrote that he'd "heard" they would. One of its key features, the Internet dreamt, would be integration of the biometric sensors Valve has been toying with to measure and respond to the player's emotional state. A feature entirely useless to a dead-skinned, wolf-hearted, metal-skulled, monkey-tricker like the Spy.

Anyone technically still human will be sad to know the Spy can detect no such plans. Valve is still scheming about how to do science to your skin and brain while you play, but they haven't even decided whether to make that hardware themselves or find a partner to do it for them.

A similarly persistent rumor in the PC gaming speakeasies and gentleman's clubs may be closer to reality: an *Elder Scrolls* MMO. Bethesda describes its current *Elder Scrolls* games as "massively single player." Any marketing executive worth his cocaine knows that you only have to change one word of that to get a fresh convoy of money trucks every month. And this time the murmurs go beyond the financial inevitability of the thing. This time, there's *lore*.

Rumor has it that *The Elder Scrolls Online*, as rumor says it's called, will be set several hundred years before any of the current games. Rumor claims three playable factions, but rumor does not name them. At that time in the lore, the elves had united, the founder of the Empire was an up-and-coming general, and the whole continent was being invaded by an Asian-styled race long gone in the other *Elder Scrolls* games: the Akaviri.

> **This rumor is closer to reality: an *Elder Scrolls* MMO**

Rumor also stipulates an announcement in May, so we'll know soon enough whether rumor is a connected industry source or an imaginative jerk. The Spy buys it.

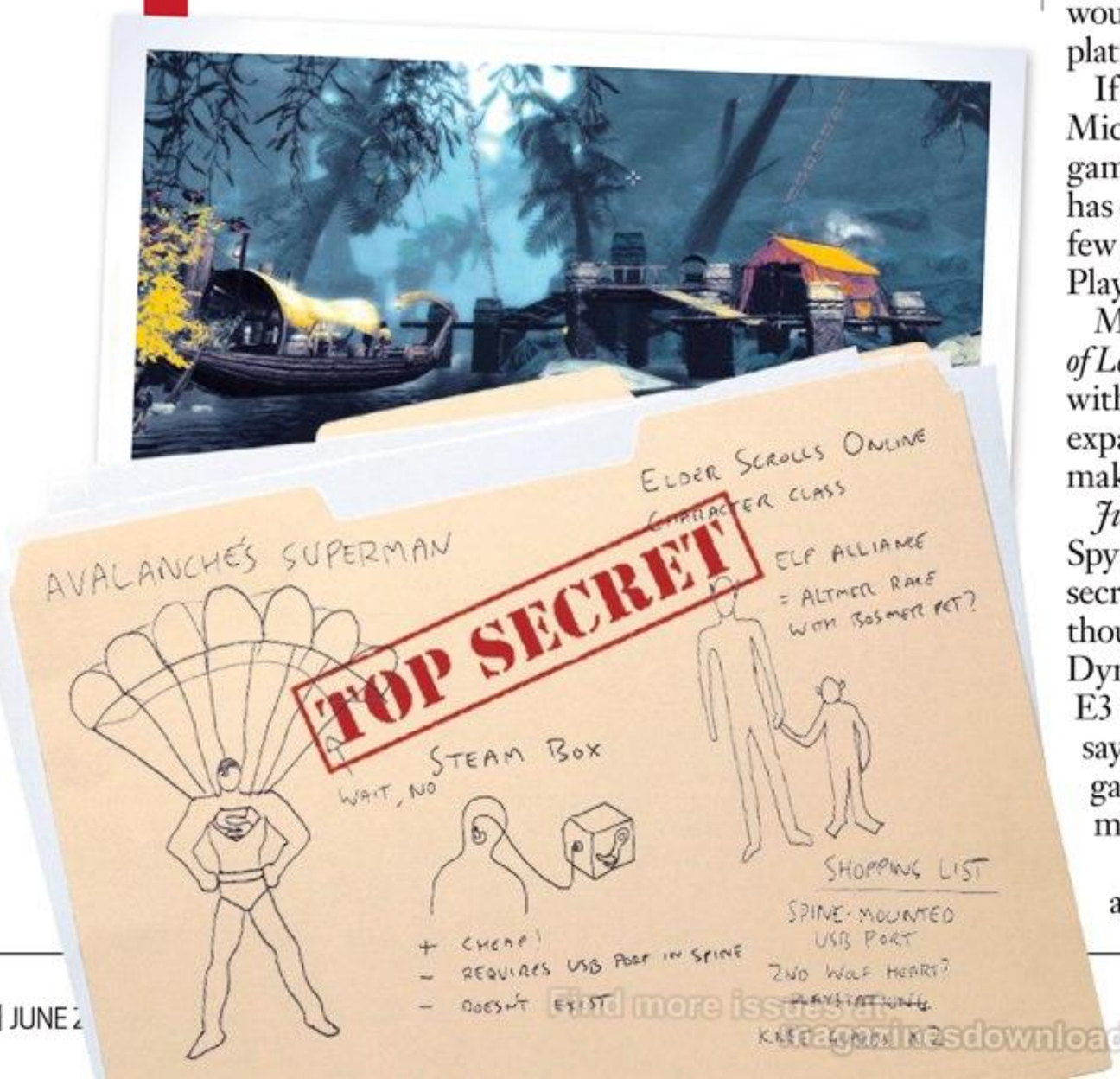
The Spy was in San Francisco—indeed, the Spy is everywhere—for GDC in March. The Unreal Engine 4 was not. Nothing conspicuous about that, except Epic's explanation. The makers of probably the most-used engine in mainstream games say they couldn't show the new one off because of an NDA—someone *else's* NDA. Why would anyone else be able to restrict when Epic talk about it's own engine? It would take a deal of enormous value and importance. A deal only a platform owner would be in a position to make. An exclusivity deal. A platform exclusivity deal. Look, it's probably Microsoft.

If the Unreal Engine 4 ends up being exclusive to Microsoft's next console, what does it mean for PC gamers? In all likelihood, nothing bad: "Xbox exclusive" has come to mean "Xbox and PC exclusive" for all but a few games of this generation. It'll be dark times for PlayStation if it's true, though.

Murkier mumblings say that Riot Games, the *League of Legends* dev, has been expanding rapidly to keep up with the spectacular success of its *Dota*-like. But isn't it expanding a little *too* rapidly for just that? What else is it making?

Just Cause creator Avalanche is even harder to read. The Spy had them pegged as the developers of the not very secret Mad Max game, but the designer they were thought to be working with has joined Crystal Dynamics. They're due to announce a licensed game at E3 this year, but Avalanche founder Chris Sunderburg says, "We aren't particularly interested in movie-based games." A non-movie licence? In gameland, that usually means comics. And comics usually mean superheroes.

Time to install the Superman mod for *Just Cause 2* and daydream. Spy out. ■ ***The Spy***



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Massive Attack

Pandas in the Mist

Exploring the hardcore side of Blizzard's panda party ***by Chris Thursten***

Since its announcement, Blizzard has been keen to reassure fans that *Mists of Pandaria* isn't a step sideways for the MMO. *World of Warcraft*'s first three expansions each focused on a different villain from the series' history, providing a sense of momentum that reached its climax with the defeat of the world-shattering dragon Deathwing. Azeroth's growth has always been based on what came before, and its largest new territories have traditionally been a return to locations first encountered in the original strategy games. "I think nostalgia is hard to underestimate in *WoW*," says Cory Stockton, lead content designer. "Where you go wrong is when you think that nostalgia is all that is keeping people in the game. Nostalgia is cool occasionally, but the game needs to be full of fresh new features to keep people engaged." *Mists of Pandaria* is the first time that nostalgia has been kicked to the curb in favor of something entirely new.

The Monk class, Pandaren race, and their starting area are intended to draw new players into the expansion, but the lost island of Pandaria is being treated as an opportunity for Blizzard to address longstanding issues with *World of Warcraft*'s endgame. "One thing that we know we didn't do well with *Cataclysm* was create enough level 85 content," Stockton explains. "People were expecting a lot of new stuff and they got more raids and more dungeons and more item levels, which is very similar to what we'd delivered with Northrend." In addition to a new level 85-90 quest series that introduces players to the factions and conflicts of the new continent, endgame is getting a thorough overhaul, to be broader, more accessible, and more competitive than *WoW* has ever been.

Level 85 Alliance players begin their adventure in the southern part of The Jade Forest, after a shipwreck strands their expeditionary force. The hastily erected camp where you begin is under siege from the Hozen, a race of short-tempered monkey warriors. The first few quests follow familiar lines—put out fires, fend off the attackers, then strike out in the brush to hunt tigers and rescue crash survivors.

Things get more interesting when you head off in search of the ship's missing captain. He's being held in a Hozen camp where you also encounter the imprisoned leader of the Jinyu, a clan of koi carp

Suicide bomber rabbits. Seriously.

"Nostalgia is cool, but the game needs to be full of new features to keep people engaged."

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Don't let their cuteness fool you, Pandaren are tough.

The Scholomance heroic revamps all the models.

Hozen: damned, dirty, crate-guarding apes.

So...who wants to play bocce ball?

people at war with the Hozen. The Jinyu can use watercrafting magic to see the future, and during one such summoning they see a spectral representation of your own character leading them to victory against the monkey onslaught. The Jinyu promptly become the Alliance's first allies on Pandaria, and an important part of their escalating conflict with the Horde.

The Horde, you see, is arming the Hozen warriors and sending them after the Jinyu. This developing proxy war between Azeroth's rulers is what propels both deeper into Pandaria in search of power, and will ultimately set up an all-out war that will play out in post-launch patches, culminating in the siege of Orgrimmar to take down rogue warchief Garrosh Hellscream. When Azeroth's ruling powers turn their sights on Pandaria, we're told to expect drastic changes to the landscape. The content's coastal zones currently feature blank expanses of beach and jungle where, in VP of Creative Development Chris Metzen's words, "the armor will roll up."

Jungle fever

Exploring untouched Pandaria, what stands out is how gracefully *WoW*'s aged. For an MMO built to be compatible with older machines back in 2004, Blizzard's art team has achieved remarkable things. The Jade Forest is a luminous green sea of bamboo, stone karsts, and tumbling waterfalls. The first instance, Temple of the Jade Serpent, is meticulously decorated with friezes and murals that merge *WoW*'s chunky architecture with traditional East Asian art.

Two of *MoP*'s new dungeons will be reworkings of *WoW* classics Scholomance and The Scarlet Monastery, but these also serve to illustrate just how far the game has come in creative terms. Grinding through the brick and stone of Scholomance loses some of its luster when compared with the hand-painted detail of Pandaria's new zones.

Since BlizzCon, Pandaria has been expanded from five zones to seven. As players work through the environments, they'll come into contact with the extensive history of the continent. Ancient rulers the Mogu—who look like a cross between an orc, a Draenei, and a bear—are the main villains, but they're joined by the rapidly multiplying evil rabbits Virmen, rampaging lizardmen Saurok, and bison-like Tauren offshoot the Yaungol. Each new zone brings its own features and challenges. In Kun-Lai Summit, you'll be working for the favor of the Shado-Pan, a mountain-bound clan of warrior Pandaren who are sworn to guard against the evils of the Sha, an energy force that gives negative emotions like doubt and anger a malevolent physical form. Panda Jedi that live in a ninja fortress, basically.

In Pandaria's lowlands, the tone is different. The Tillers are a faction of farmers whose land forms the breadbasket of the Pandaren empire. You'll earn favor with the Tillers by lending a hand, in what amounts to a full-in game version of console farming classic *Harvest Moon*. You can own a farm and choose which crops to plant, using abilities to boost the rate at which your plants grow. A different set of merchants will show up in the marketplace each day, buying and selling different vegetables in return for faction. It's designed to be something that players can lose themselves in, and it's part of the way that Blizzard is rethinking the faction grind for the expansion.

In the Vale of Eternal Blossoms, Blizzard's revisiting the success of *Cataclysm*'s Molten Front zone. Players will join the Golden

Hozen + brewery = trouble.

Lotus faction in protecting Pandaria's most valuable artifacts from the Mantid, a new foe that dwells beyond the Great Wall that splits Pandaria from north to south. When you first join, you'll be limited to scouting work, but increasing your standing within the faction will directly alter what quests you have access to and the importance of the missions you're entrusted with. "As you play each day, as you're earning faction, your base changes and grows. More people show up there for you," explains Stockton. "The dungeon that you go into—another wing opens up when you earn revered status, and that whole wing is full of separate quests, so it's not just 'I'm revered, I got a tabard.' It's 'I'm revered, I have new content.'"

If you're interested in exploring Pandaria's history further, the Lorewalkers are a faction of record-keepers that reward exploration and the recovery of historical artifacts with new tales from the island's past. These aren't simply chunks of text, however: each new story is enacted as a play at the Lorewalkers' temple. It's a fun way to add life to what's often treated as background fluff.

Diversifying your life

A new quest type, scenarios, also add flair to the faction grind. Scenarios are multi-stage phased group encounters that encourage a more reactive style of play than traditional *WoW*, setting up an array of objectives within an area and then encouraging you to approach them in your own way. They'll have their own queueing mechanism, and they're designed to be class-agnostic: you won't need a healer or tank to succeed. Most scenarios are for five players, but the system supports up to 25—so raid-scale phased quests are a possibility for the future.

Losing the magic triangle of healers, tanks, and DPS is a big change, but it's one that's restricted to scenario play. "We feel really strongly about the healer-tank-DPS model that we have now," says Stockton. "It helps people have identity. If you're a good tank, it feels awesome to be a good tank and that's something that builds community. We don't want to lose that."

For players who've grown accustomed to *WoW*'s cooperative game, challenge modes will stress the importance of skillful play more than ever before. They're time-trial runs of existing dungeons with rewards for passing bronze, silver and gold thresholds.

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By fire, be purged!

Wearing turtles on your shoulders is so in right now.

Thank God, I'm a country bear!

Look, another species that wants to split you in half!

Achieving a full set of silver times will net you an exclusive suit of armor, and gold times are rewarded with a unique mount, Blizzard's take on a Chinese Shishi lion. When you post a time, your group composition will be recorded to both server and guild-wide leaderboards. Going down in history as the fastest group on the server will be one of *WoW*'s most prestigious achievements for top-level players. The stats on your items are normalized for challenge mode runs, so the best gear won't be enough to get you a top time: you'll need skill, and four other people who know what they're doing.

New emphasis is being placed on visual rewards over boosts to your item score. The phenomenal popularity of the transmogrification system, which allows players to combine the looks of one item with the stats of another, is the reason that the challenge mode armor for each class comes with no stats by default.

If the system is popular, there's no reason it can't be rolled out to raids as well. Where the "looking for raid" system has made high-end content less prestigious by opening the door to the casual masses, challenge modes will once again ensure that *WoW*'s elite have a way of distinguishing themselves. In practice, it feels like the best of both worlds: a way of celebrating commitment without locking a significant proportion of the player base out of the game's most exciting content.

Mists of Pandaria's PvP offering is less substantial. There'll be one new arena and two new battlegrounds, although the latter do demonstrate some innovative thinking. *WoW*'s first entirely indoor battleground, Silvershard Mines, takes place in a goblin diamond mine under Stranglethorn Vale. In it, players compete to control three minecarts that move simultaneously from depot to depot in a way that resembles *Team Fortress 2*'s payload mode.

Exploring untouched Pandaria, what stands out is how remarkably *WoW* has aged.

The other new battleground takes place in the Temple of Kot Mogu on Pandaria itself. Seizing control of an artifact will give one player on each team a huge buff to damage, reduce the amount that they can be healed, and give them the power to score points for their team based on where in the map they are. Fighting in the exposed center earns more points, hiding on the fringes of the map earns less.

What impresses me about *Mists of Pandaria* is not just the sheer amount of content: it's the critical eye that has been applied throughout. Blizzard has learned that simply adding dungeons isn't a compelling reason for players to stick with an 8-year-old MMO. They're comprehensively updating and rethinking the game in a way that makes it feel fresher, in many ways, than its younger contemporaries. The fact that the setting is so different from what has come before actually plays into its favor, in that regard. Pandaria isn't a retirement home for a veteran MMO: it's a sign that Blizzard still has exciting things to say about *World of Warcraft*. ■ **Chris Thursten**

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Weapons free

Nine must-play $0 shooters for soldiers without a fortune

The free-to-play model isn't limited to MMOs and MOBAs—there's a heap of free first-person shooters out there just waiting for your trigger finger. We put nine standouts to the test, noting their overall visual appeal, what you can expect to spend if you're wooed by premium items, and how much time we spent enjoying them, so you can judge which are worth investing in for the long haul. ***by Lucas Sullivan***

SURVIVAL HORROR
ALLIANCE OF VALIANT ARMS

bit.ly/allianceF2P

■ **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★★
■ **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $15 on a tricked-out weapon for your preferred class
■ **HOW'S IT PLAY?** At face value, AVA is a run-of-the-mill modern shooter, tasking you as the Pointman, Rifleman, or Sniper. That's all well and good—but the real heart of the game is its dread-inducing Infected mode. This exhilarating version of hide-and-go-seek turns your allies against you as vicious zombie-players infect them. Nothing is as pants-soilingly terrifying as being one of the last few survivors, huddling in a dark corner while your teammates futilely flee for their lives.
■ **FUN FOR:** An evening of pure terror

A virtual block world, virtually recreated.

STALKING PREY
CROSS FIRE

bit.ly/crossfireF2P

■ **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★
■ **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $8 for a stylish character skin
■ **HOW'S IT PLAY?** Cross Fire feels like a Korean Counter-Strike, complete with an AWP proxy and unpredictable bullet physics. You can choose standard team deathmatch or elimination encounters, but I gravitated towards Ghost Mode—which emphasizes sneaking skills over twitch reflexes. The members of one knife-wielding team have the power to turn invisible if they stand stationary, forcing them to creep closer and closer towards their targets before finally striking. Your opponent might be two inches from your face—but you might not even know it.
■ **FUN FOR:** 10 percent of however long you've played Counter-Strike

THE KING
TEAM FORTRESS 2

bit.ly/teamfortressF2P

■ **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★★★★★
■ **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $10 for your favorite class' starter pack
■ **HOW'S IT PLAY?** When it comes to grade-A games, Valve doesn't mess around. With nine distinct roles to fill and a metric butt-ton of maps and modes, TF2 is the pinnacle of class-based shooters. Since its release back in 2007 as part of The Orange Box, developer and community alike have been pushing out an unending tidal wave of new content. Highlights include the frantic Payload mode, in which you cart a megaton bomb through enemy lines, and the multitude of game-themed crossover items. The instantly-recognizable characters feel like the cast of a blood-soaked Pixar flick, and each has been carefully fleshed out with a unique gameplay style and personality (bolstered by streams of guffaw-worthy dialogue). But best of all are the unforgettable moments that TF2 ceaselessly generates. How can I forget the time I nailed headshots on two rocket-jumping Soldiers? Or when I triple-jumped as a Scout, out one window and into another, to flank and bludgeon a Heavy? Whether you adore or despise its well-stocked store of ornamental headpieces, everyone can appreciate TF2's masterful balance and intrinsic fun.
■ **FUN FOR:** Eons (especially if you love hats)

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TEEN WOLF

WOLF TEAM

bit.ly/wolfteamF2P

- **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★
- **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $1 for a radical back tattoo
- **HOW'S IT PLAY?** Like your average, ho-hum shooter...until you transform into a werewolf! (Insert rousing guitar licks here.) This wacky twist lets you morph your rent-a-soldier into a hulking lycanthrope on the fly, granting increased speed and wall-running but restricting you to melee attacks. Each canine alter-ego has its own specialty—the Beserker Wolf, for instance, can detonate itself in a suicidal charge. The premise sounds like a straight-to-DVD movie, but getting pounced on by a gigantic military shapeshifter bizarrely makes me giddy.
- **FUN FOR:** 30 minutes of "WTF?!" action (if you're a member of Team Jacob, double that)

A virtual block world, virtually recreated.

BATTLE MECHS

BLACKLIGHT: RETRIBUTION

bit.ly/blacklightF2P

- **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★★★
- **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $10 to buy a a trusty assault rifle for keeps
- **HOW'S IT PLAY?** *Retribution* is the free-to-play follow-up to 2010's underappreciated Blacklight: Tango Down, a futuristic shooter in which technology is the ace up your sleeve and cyberpunk cities are the battlefield. Using your helmet's HRV (Hyper Reality Visor), you can effectively see through walls, and killing sprees grant you access to the hulking Hardsuit mech to morph you into a walking tank.
- **FUN FOR:** As long as it takes to run into someone who bought all the best items

ROCKETEERING

TRIBES: ASCEND

bit.ly/tribesaF2P

- **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★★★
- **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $13 to unlock basic versions of every class; $15 more to specialize in one or two that you enjoy
- **HOW'S IT PLAY?** You know those awesome dreams in which you're inexplicably gifted with the power of flight? *Tribes: Ascend* is like that, but with a lot more high-speed pursuits and exploding projectiles (unless you have *really* awesome dreams). The spiritual successor to one of PC shooters' great grandfathers, *Tribes* flips typical FPS movement on its head by outfitting every player with a jetpack and the power to combat the bothersome effects of friction. Skiing is a technique that's essential to *Tribes* mastery: you build up momentum by cruising down hills and boosting off jumps, and once you've gotten the hang of it, you can snatch up the enemy flag at roughly the speed of sound. Thus far, there are nine classes to try out, each with unique tactics and gadgetry. It'll cost you to unlock them immediately, but you can take any class for a test drive in the practice modes and rest easy knowing your money is going toward the role that best suits you.
- **FUN FOR:** The years it will take before dominion over gravity gets old (if that ever happens)

V FOR VICTORY

BATTLEFIELD HEROES

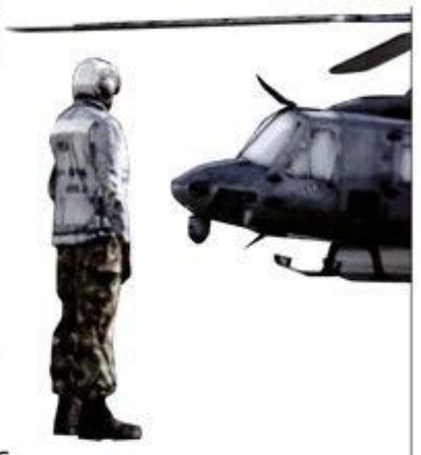
bit.ly/bfheroesF2P

- **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★★
- **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $5 for a pair of unlimited-use beginner weapons
- **HOW'S IT PLAY?** Call me crazy, but this is my favorite entry in the reputable Battlefield series. With a charming aesthetic and Battlefield's staple combo of infantry and vehicular warfare, this shooter's got a little something for everybody. The cartoony WWII setting is backed by lightweight, familiar gameplay with a classic rock-paper-scissors class balance, and Heroes features some of the F2P category's best character customization variety. I was sold the moment I saw a Saxton Hale lookalike gunning down a Commando dressed as a samurai.
- **FUN FOR:** A couple weeks of lighthearted Axis-versus-Allies fun

BULLET DROP

ARMA 2: FREE

bit.ly/armaF2P



- **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★★
- **EXPECT TO SPEND:** Nothing at all, until you're ready to purchase the full game
- **HOW'S IT PLAY?** As our local expert Evan will tell you, fidelity and emergent gameplay are where Arma excels. If ultra-realism and lifelike battles are your style, you won't find a better deal than Arma 2: Free, which offers the entire multiplayer portion of the game sans high-definition graphics and the ability to install community mods. Curious about the Arma series, but not sure if its methodical combat is right for you? Start here.
- **FUN FOR:** The month or so it takes to start craving user-made mods

ARMY OF ONE

WAR INC.

bit.ly/warincF2P

- **PRODUCTION VALUE:** ★
- **EXPECT TO SPEND:** $8 for a month's rental of a decent sniper rifle and a bitchin' skull mask
- **HOW'S IT PLAY?** It may not be the prettiest game in the world, and the sound design's oddly sparse, but there's definitely fun to be had here. Like Battlefield Heroes, War Inc. takes the camera to a third-person perspective, so new tactics (like peeking around corners with your wider perspective) come into play. It's also a sniper's paradise: the colorful masks and attire make headshots a breeze.
- **FUN FOR:** However long you can keep up a sniping spree

No Controller Necessary

Classic games brought to life by custom **TERRARIA** maps *by Gavin Townsley*

SILENT HILL 2

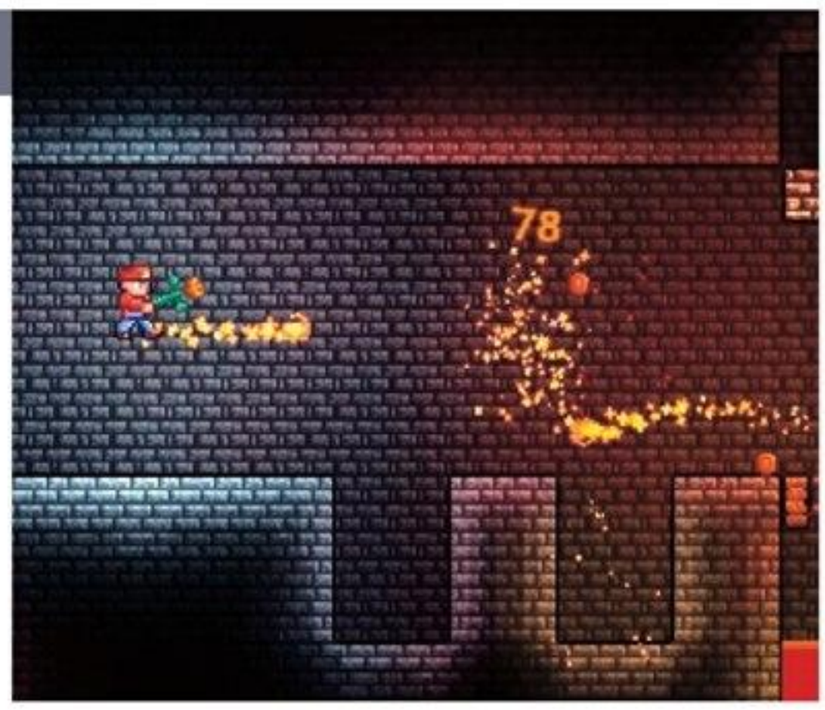
http://bit.ly/pcgsilenthill

Silent Hill 2 is one of the creepiest games ever made, which makes us wonder how the heck this horror classic converts so well to the colorful world of *Terraria*. But it does: the story-heavy adventure progresses through every stage of the original game, including that first dark transition in the hospital. Navigating requires more extensive sign-reading than most custom maps, but the payoff is a wonderful experience reminiscent of Konami's eerie classic.

NES SUPER MARIO

http://bit.ly/pcgmario

This custom map is more of an explorable homage than a functional *Super Mario Bros.* game. Sure, you get the overalls, plumber hat, and a nearly brick-for-brick recreation of Worlds 1 through 3, but *Terraria*'s mechanics make it very awkward to loot coins from chests and turtles. This map is definitely worth checking out, though—it's one of the best examples of how *Terraria* players are using the materials at their disposal to recreate old favorites.



ZELDA THE ADVENTURE

http://bit.ly/pcgzelda

Zelda the Adventure isn't a one-to-one remake like NES Super Mario, and it doesn't have the depth of story found in *Silent Hill 2*. But against all odds, it's far and away the most fun of the bunch. Playing like *Zelda 2*'s lost cousin, this custom map takes the parkour of *Terraria* and sets it in the classic Hyrulian theme. You'll put on the traditional green tunic and explore five dungeons, each with unique platforming challenges and plenty of useful rewards for the next set of obstacles.

MOBA HERO OF THE MONTH

INVOKER

MEMORIZING MAGIC WITH DOTA 2'S MOST VERSATILE SPELL-SLINGER

Playing the MOBA hero who's heralded as the most complex caster of all time is, in a word, intimidating. By attempting to master *Dota 2*'s Invoker, I've started down a path that will end in either enlightenment or insanity. You see, Invoker's like no other hero out there: instead of the typical four

'Scuse me—Chaos Meteor comin' through.

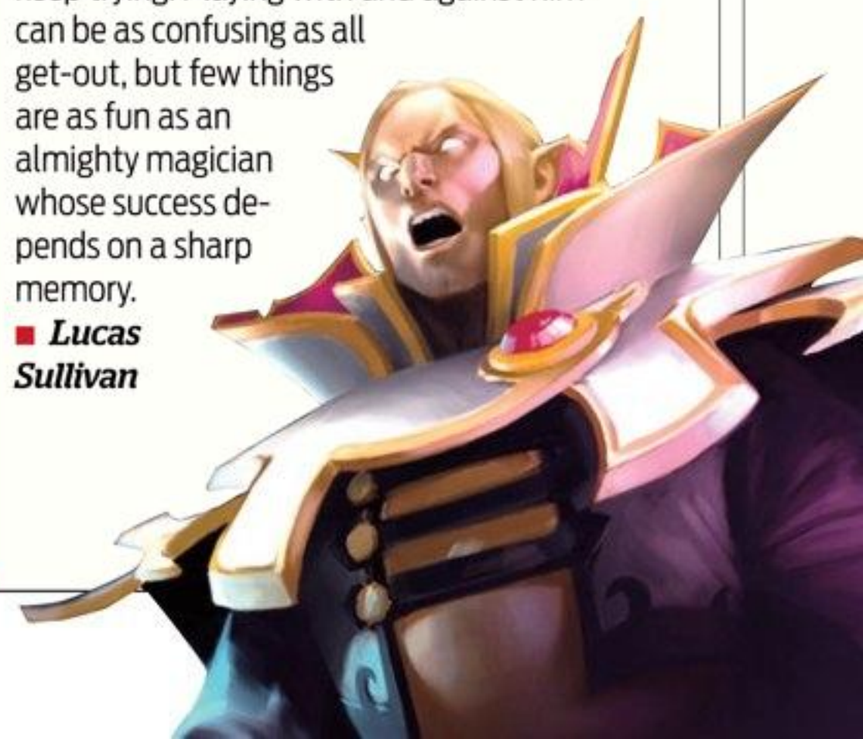
spells and stat boosts, he's got a whopping 14 abilities at his disposal, ten of which rely on three-part mnemonic strings. Yeah, good luck with that.

With a wide array of spells at his fingertips, this Intelligence hero crumples in the hands of inexperienced players, who fumble to conjure his abilities in a crisis. When played to his full potential, however, the Invoker can reach into his bag of tricks to summon the perfect spell for any situation by using the Quas, Wex, and Exort incantations (with seven levels each) and his Invoke ultimate ability.

Enemies got the jump on you? Go invisible with the Quas-Quas-Wex Ghost Walk. Triple Wex grants the EMP ability—great for harassing and draining mana from opposing heroes. My personal favorite is his Chaos Meteor (Exort-Exort-Wex), which causes a gigantic molten boulder to crash down on my target's noggin, setting the ground on fire as it rolls over their mangled body.

Though I'm still far from mastery over the Invoker's ever-changing roles of carry, support, and assassin, studying matches of pro-level Invoker play keeps me inspired to keep trying. Playing with and against him can be as confusing as all get-out, but few things are as fun as an almighty magician whose success depends on a sharp memory.

■ ***Lucas Sullivan***



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DEV MAN TALKING

Ian Hardingham is the designer and lead coder for hit indie game *Frozen Synapse*. His first game was a Hentai casual game for the Psion 3 with a rude name. His favorite cheese is Demi Pont-l'Évêque.

Let's talk about arcade game design. I'll define arcade games as a game you play for a short amount of time, lose, and then get a score. Arcade Games have no progression between playthroughs. Examples: *Tetris*, *Metal Slug*, *Missile Command*, *Asteroids*, *Spelunky*, *Street Fighter*, pinball, *US Squadron*, *Lumines*.

That list shows a vast range of genres. "Arcade" is not a genre as we traditionally view it. In fact, it's more like the term "Roguelike"—it defines various meta-game characteristics.

I love arcade games. They tend to be more skill-based; I can have a meaningful playthrough very quickly; and their structure tends to mean that a new high-score is always in play. But some are certainly better than others.

I believe the most important thing that some get right and some get wrong is how likely you are to lose at any given moment—or the "death curve" as I'll call it. The death curve is crucial to these games. It defines how long you'll play for; how often you'll get a new high score; how many times you'll play in a given session. On a more meta-level, it will define how addictive your game is.

Pinball has the perfect death curve. For a new player, at any given moment they might have a, say, 20 percent chance of losing. As a player gets better, that percentage chance simply decreases. A new player can have a very lucky game where he survives much longer than usual, and a great player can still have a hugely unlucky game where he loses all three balls in the first minute. (Probably because he's hung over.) This produces the kind of "random series of reward" which psychologists know our animal-brains love. And it does that without undermining truly improving at the game. Finally, pinball allows you to influence the death curve yourself by choosing more- or less-risky shots.

Tetris, on the other hand, is my poster child for the bad death curve. As you play *Tetris*, the blocks fall from the sky faster and faster. This is one of the laziest pieces of game design I have ever seen. It compresses the death curve so you are always dying at the same time. You have a basically zero percent chance of losing at the beginning of a game of Tetris, and when it hits level ten you are pretty much going to lose within the next few seconds. You play *Tetris* compulsively but your games always last similar amounts of time, and whether or not you get a high score feels random and unrewarding. Most damningly, the actions you take at the start of the game are far less meaningful than those at the end.

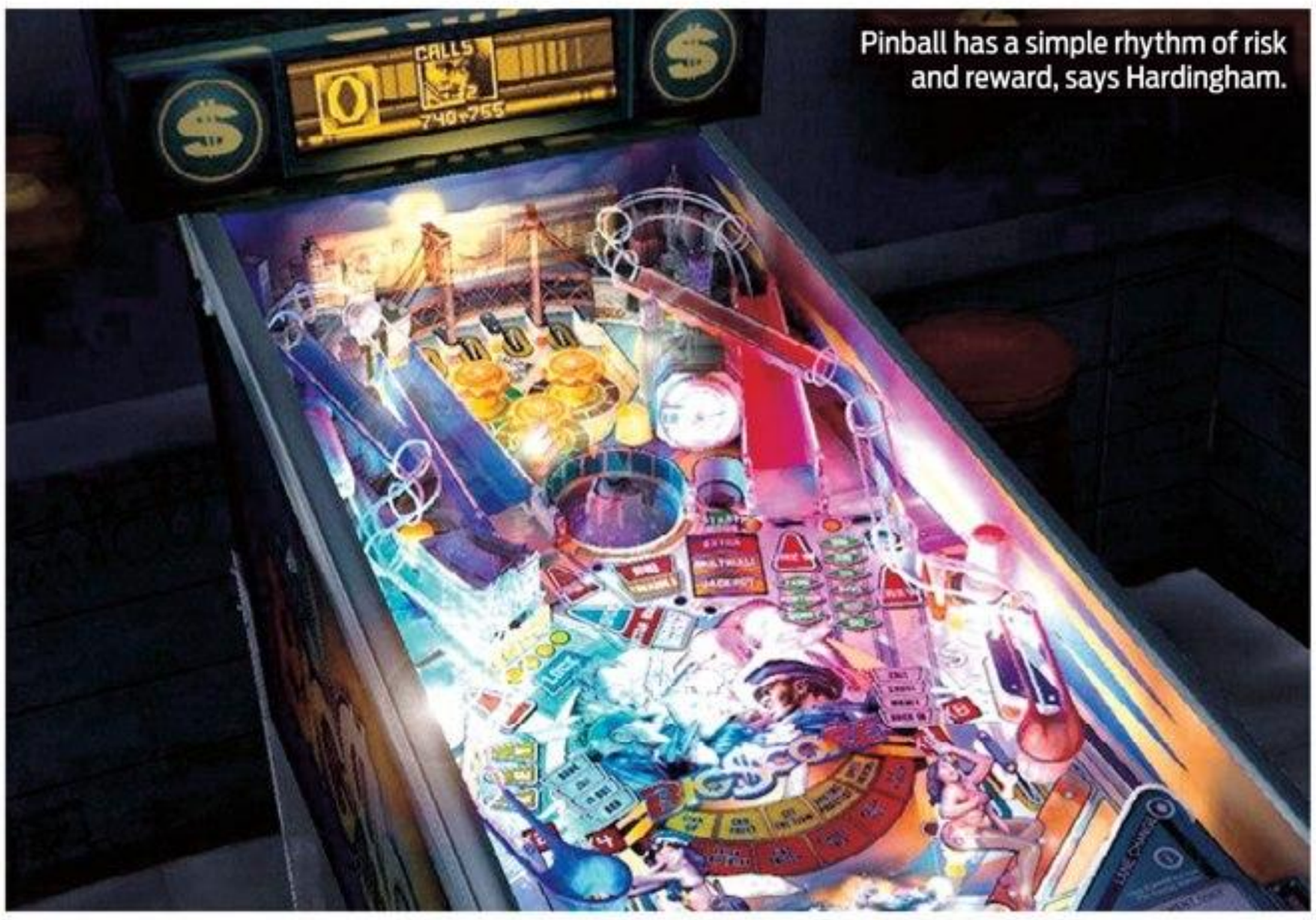
> **"*Tetris* is my poster child for the bad death curve."**

Pace makers

It's going to be difficult for me to persuade people that games shouldn't get harder as you get further into them. But we can see how other mechanics can improve the death curve. *Spelunky*'s levels get gradually harder, but still offer you the option of being very risky early on for great reward. You can rush through *Spelunky*'s early levels—and most new players will. But if you min-max the early levels it will truly effect your entire playthrough, at the cost of greater risk.

Another important aspect of the death curve is how long a playthrough takes. A too-short play time can be frustrating, but a far worse crime is a long one. It seems to take me half an hour to get through a *Lumines* session. I don't want to be playing a disposable casual game like *Lumines* for half an hour without a break. Playthroughs should take five minutes—probably even less than that.

The death curve is responsible for how addictive your favorite arcade game is. Different people will prefer different death curves, but when making one of these games you should pay attention to the design of your death curve right from the start. ■



Pinball has a simple rhythm of risk and reward, says Hardingham.

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TACTICAL ADVANTAGE

Lately it feels as if strategy gaming has gone back in time. More than usual, I mean, for a hobby that has always been self-consciously anachronistic, loathe to give up on design conventions established with cardboard and dice. A couple weeks ago I filed a review of a new *Jagged Alliance* game, then hopped on a train to New York to go look at a new *XCOM*. On the way down I puttered with *Panzer Corps*, Matrix's updated *Panzer General*. Pinch me, I think it's 1996 again.

It's thrilling to see classic franchises making returns in one form or another, but I'm sometimes confused by what I want from remakes. They seem like a no-win for developers because as powerful as nostalgia can be, it is also treacherous. Remakes play on the memory of a feeling. They promise that we can have "the same, but better," a notion that is as unrealistic as it is irresistible.

> **I don't want the same games I was playing twenty years ago.**

Within a few weeks of *Panzer Corps*' debut, some hardened strategy fans I know were complaining that it was too much like *Panzer General*. They pointed out that *Panzer General* itself had a lot of problems that only vanished when you considered it through rose-tinted glasses. For my part, I eventually started to feel that it lacked some undefinable quality that made *Panzer General* a beloved classic. Maybe it needed better scenarios, or an art style with more character. Whatever the reason, *Panzer Corps* was destined to take shots for being too faithful to an old game, and or not recreating the memories associated with it.

You want to know the game that really recreated the *Panzer General* experience? *Unity of Command*, which is really nothing like *Panzer General* at all, except that it is another brilliant, elegant turn-based wargame that makes the hoariest conventions of the genre feel fresh and exciting. That's the real problems remakes face: we're in the middle of another strategy gaming golden age. We're so busy having new and exciting experiences that the old ones don't seem quite as magical anymore.

Jagged Alliance: Back in Action would have been a fine game except for all the slavish, kitschy devotion to *Jagged Alliance 2*. It's weakest elements were the ones pointlessly and sentimentally held-over from the original. *Panzer Corps* reminded us both why we loved *Panzer General* and why a lot of us moved on. If I'm being honest with myself, I don't really want the same games I was playing twenty years ago. I want better games.

So I was relieved when I saw *XCOM* and didn't think it looked much like the original at all. I may have gotten a little gust of nostalgia when I saw the combat team disembarking from their transport, a vivid flashback of the first time I played and I lost my first trooper the moment he stepped off the gangway. But it was a cameo, a nod to the original, and *XCOM* quickly broke with tradition as the shooting started.

XCOM is simpler, and more streamlined. It's exactly what you might expect from a Firaxis take on the game: find what makes a game really fun and exciting, and trim out everything else that you can.

During my time with the development team, I heard a lot about about how Firaxis is trying to stay true to the original, but I don't believe it. Firaxis is making a game based more on what we remember was great about the original game, and not the game itself. There is a lesson here, and maybe it takes a studio as storied and confident as Firaxis to teach it: the past is for inspiration and learning, but not worship. Games keep getting better, because we keep learning from them. ■

Modern customization options should add to our emotional investment in *XCOM*'s units.

Rob Zacny hosts the Three Moves Ahead strategy podcast. This month he's been obsessed with *Unity of Command* and *The Witcher*, and disappointed by *Arkham City*.

This is **Richard**. He knows it's his job to teach his son **Scotty** what this whole gaming thing is about. The age rating helps him **pick the right games**, but being a good dad means he always wants to know more.

That's exactly what the **ESRB's rating summaries** are for.

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Rich H.
Lafayette, IN

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You might know **Joshua**.
He loves video games, and he owns enough to know they're not all meant for kids. That's why he reminds his friends (at least the ones that have kids) that they all have **big black letters on the box** to help parents find the ones that are best for their families.

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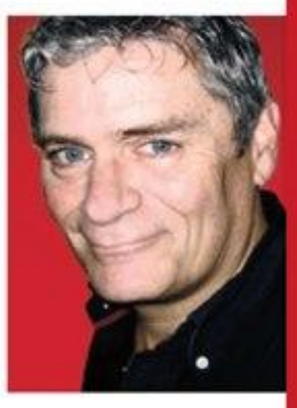
SIMULATION IN SIMULATION



Andy Mahood kept his sticks and wheels active this month with *Microsoft Flight*, *rFactor*, *RACE On*, *Rise of Flight*, and *iRacing.com*.

It didn't start out as a PC-versus-console grudge match, but it ended that way. I rarely play PS3 games (I initially purchased my Sony console as a Blu-ray player), but I'd been gifted a copy of *Gran Turismo 5* over Christmas and, after I stared at that cello-wrapped plastic case for a few months, curiosity finally got the better of me. Just how good was this "simulation" the PlayStation crowd was so enamored with?

So, I cracked the seal and loaded up my first PlayStation game in months (my last foray into Sony-land had been with some downloadable demos for *Need For Speed: Shift* and *DiRT 3*). After confirming that my somewhat dusty Dualshock controller had a fresh charge in it, I booted the game and prepared to be overwhelmed. That was my hope anyway.

Gran Turismo 5 is one of the best-reviewed racing games ever developed for the PS3, and deservedly so. Other racing titles have rated as well or better, but *GT5* earned its love by arguably being the platform's—indeed, all of consoledom's—only true simulation. After just a few hours with it I could see it came by its plaudits honestly. Polyphony pulled out all the stops to outdo its previous *Gran Turismo* chapters and the game is so deep and feature rich it's hard to know what to praise first.

As impressive as 1000-plus cars, 70-plus tracks, and buttery 1080p graphics are, however, my primary mission here was to scope out driving physics. With the tag line "the real driving simulator" emblazoned on every game box I was looking forward to a visceral and rewarding racing experience that might offer a viable alternative to all of my PC-based simming favorites.

After all, this was the game that launched a Speed Network TV show (*Nissan GT Academy*) where the fastest *GT5* racers in the United States earned a trip to Silverstone, England and the right to compete for a real world professional racing ride. Sony must have a lot of faith in its product to position it as a builder of future racing stars.

Sadly, my experience proved disappointing. Although *GT5* didn't exhibit that overt "arcadey" feel of most console racers, neither did it communicate a convincing sensation of tires on tarmac. At least not the kind I'd come to expect after turning so many laps with *iRacing*, *rFactor*, *Live For Speed* and assorted other top PC racing sims. I was able to improve things somewhat by visiting the options page and turning off all driving aids (most are on by default) but the magic was still missing. I expect a racing simulator to communicate a lot of information when I'm pushing behind the wheel—understeer , oversteer, stability loss under braking, and that subtle tire squeal that grows into a crescendo of tortured rubber when you push an innocent performance car too hard. *GT5* came close on a number of counts but it just couldn't close the deal when it mattered.

> **"*GT5* came close, but couldn't close the deal."**

The lack of a detailed cockpit view certainly didn't help (and you can't call yourself a simulator when driving perspectives are restricted to chase, hood, and bumper), and the cars were a little too tame and controllable when driven outside their performance envelopes. The canned tire squeal audio and wood-against-wood *thump* sound when you lightly hit—or full-on body-slammed—an AI car pulled me further out of the moment. I expect I'm just too spoiled by those wonderfully honed PC racing offerings from SimBin, iRacing, and ISI to ever embrace Sony's "real driving simulator." It's a fun and rewarding game on many levels, but if you want real driving physics, stick with your PC. ■

If you want a real simulation, stick with PC titles like *iRacing*.

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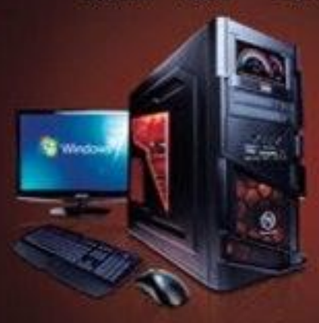

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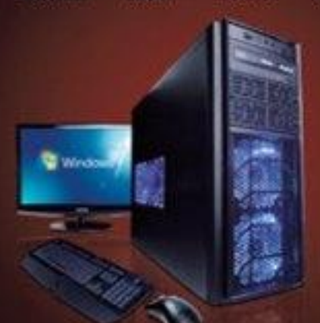

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ALTERNATE LIVES

Desslock is fleeing this column, but he hopes to adventure indefinitely in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Witcher 2*, *Mass Effect 3* and *Dark Souls*.

Fifteen years ago I wrote my first RPG column for a PC gaming magazine and back then, the genre was in shoddy shape. *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, *Might & Magic*, *Bard's Tale* and the D&D gold box games had dominated in the 80s and early 90s, but by 1995 they'd all vanished or had questionable futures. RPGs were huge, costly games to develop and even RPG of the year award winners like *Anvil of Dawn* and *Stonekeep* were commercially struggling. The genre had grown stagnant and was barely retaining relevance after first-person shooters and real-time strategy games arrived.

> **There's still so much room for growth in the genre.**

This is my last *PC Gamer* column, and I'm delighted with how the genre has evolved and diversified since I started writing about it. Back then, there were basically two types of RPGs: *Ultima* clones and *Wizardry* clones. In the past year, four of my all-time favorite games have been released, and although they're all considered RPGs, they're as remarkable for their differences as their quality. *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Mass Effect 3* and *Dark Souls* have virtually nothing in common, yet they're all incredible, commercially successful RPGs. We've also been rewarded with *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Alpha Protocol*, *Dungeon Siege 3*, *Dragon Age 2*, and *Kingdoms of Amalur*, while *Risen 2* and *Diablo III* are immediately pending—all games that are also quite diverse from the four favorites I highlighted above. The genre has exploded with quality, diverse roleplaying experiences and is now more relevant than ever.

Despite this new golden age for the genre, it's disappointing that turn-based, tactical combat RPGs have all but vanished. But there's even some hope for those games to return. A Kickstarter fundraiser for a new *Wasteland* game easily met its objectives, and turn-based *Avadon* is enjoying unprecedented commercial success for Spiderweb Software thanks to its iPad availability. New publishing avenues are further strengthening the genre and gaming in general.

The future of the RPG

In the dark years for the genre, I thought I might never again see a virtual world as interesting as *Ultima VII's* Britannia, but now I can pluck plants, chop wood, join guilds, decorate homes, endure crappy weather and meet and loot the neighbors in *Skyrim* and *Risen 2*. Simplistic dungeon crawls have evolved into the tense, well-designed, ruthless (but always fair) environments of *Dark Souls* and the polished, multiplayer spelunking offered by *Diablo III*. There was such misguided outcry against the so-called corrupting elements of D&D that I thought I'd never see the nudity and adult content of *Witcher 2*, or be able to develop passionate relationships with companions in *Mass Effect 3*. While some early RPGs allowed you to transfer characters to subsequent installments, *Mass Effect 3* allows you to see the consequences of decisions made through two prior games, while offering a story-driven experience far beyond anything imaginable in RPGs 15 years ago.

I long to play a game that manages to offer the virtual world experience of *Skyrim*, the combat system of *Dark Souls*, the wit and moral nuance of Obsidian games like *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*, the adult content and gritty lore of *Witcher 2*, and the well-written character interactions and narrative of *Mass Effect 3*. Even that package wouldn't satiate me, since I'd also like to control a party of adventurers through turn-based combat like *Avadon's* and occasionally hook up with friends to play cooperative multiplayer in as seamless fashion as *Diablo III* offers.

There's still so much room for growth in the genre, so many different ways to offer players the opportunity to roleplay characters of their own choosing through personalized adventures. I'm excited to see what's next. ■

Mass Effect 3 is the ultimate story-driven RPG.

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GHOST RECON ONLINE

PLAYED IT A tough free-to-play shooter with a tactical edge

"Aaaah!" I said as bullets pounded my beleaguered soldier. As I tapped Ctrl to send him cowering behind a plank, a grenade sailed in. "Aaaaaaah!" I abandoned my plank and made a break for freedom. There was a burst of small arms fire and my soldier fell to the floor like a sack of disappointed potatoes. I was dead. At least I'd stopped screaming.

I died several more times in the following minutes. I was shot in the head by an unseen sniper at the end of the street. I was obliterated by a shotgun blast as I jumped through a doorway. I was capped in the spine by a decloaking recon soldier. Death by death, my questions grew. Should a free-to-play shooter be this brutal? Should it be this hard?

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Ghost Recon Online is a third-person multiplayer shooter set in the near future. It has almost nothing in common with the tactical shooter series of the same name, beyond the futuristic gadgets its soldiers wield. As a member of a special forces squad, you have to capture control points in urban warzones for unexplained reasons. Doing so will net you experience which can be used to level up your soldier and unlock new gun attachments, armor pieces and grenades.

There's very little reconnaissance, and there are no ghosts at all, but there is cover. Lots and lots of sweet, life-preserving cover. Sticking to it religiously is the key to surviving the fight.

New approaches

I was doing it all wrong, I soon realized. This isn't *Call of Duty*. You can't just continuously sprint around the map like a lone madman, gunning down enemies as they pop into view. Taking those control points requires some thought. I changed my style. I started dashing from cover to cover in a low crouch, gluing my man to walls at every opportunity. This time I survived for more than a few minutes. I even killed a guy, catching him unaware as he was laying prone.

Then his friend popped out of cover behind him and shot me in the head. I was still doing it wrong.

I needed backup. Good teamwork is essential to victory in *GRO*. I should have known. The game draws ostentatious blue lines from your soldier to any nearby, off-screen friends. The more soldiers you have guarding your back, the more likely it is you'll survive each dash to cover.

Just a couple of bullets can kill. Pot shots can be used to remind cowering enemies that you're waiting for them to pop their heads above the parapet. This can be used to mollify snipers, giving the rest of your team the breathing space to

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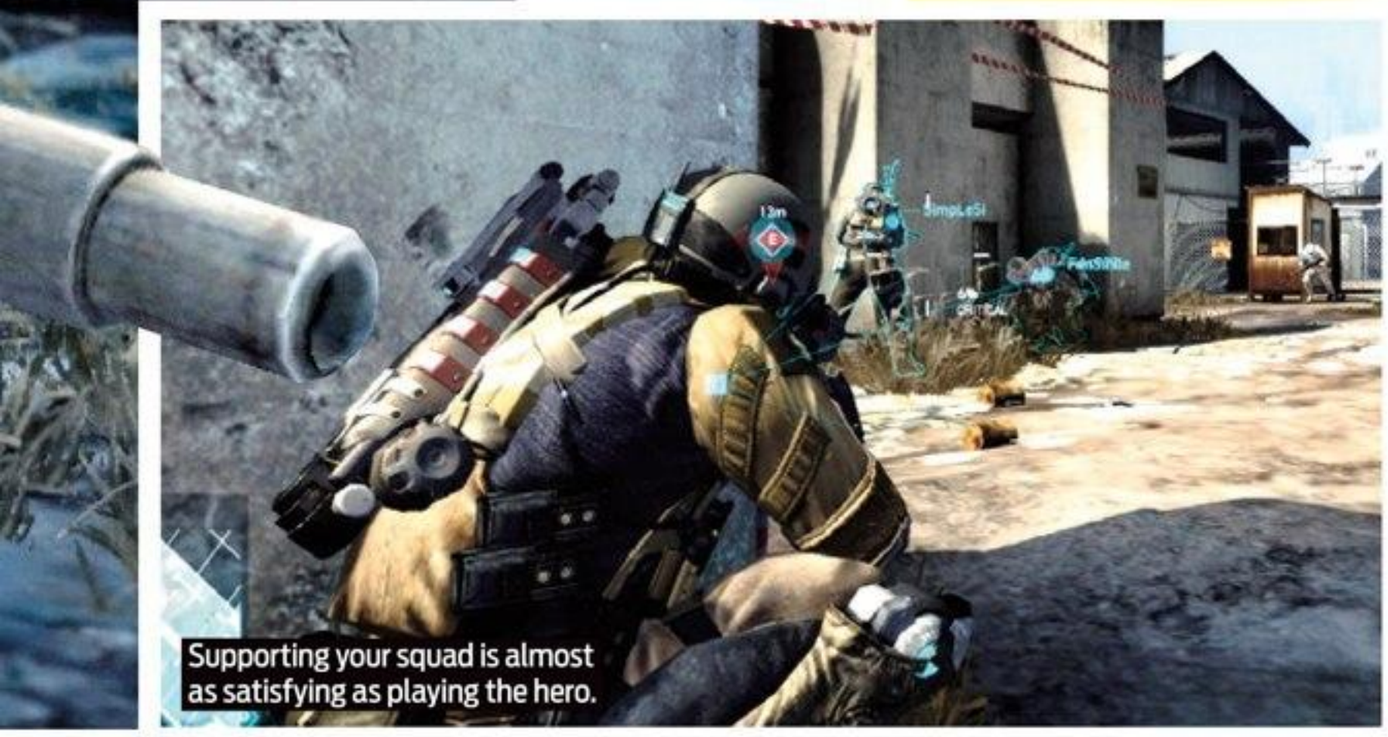
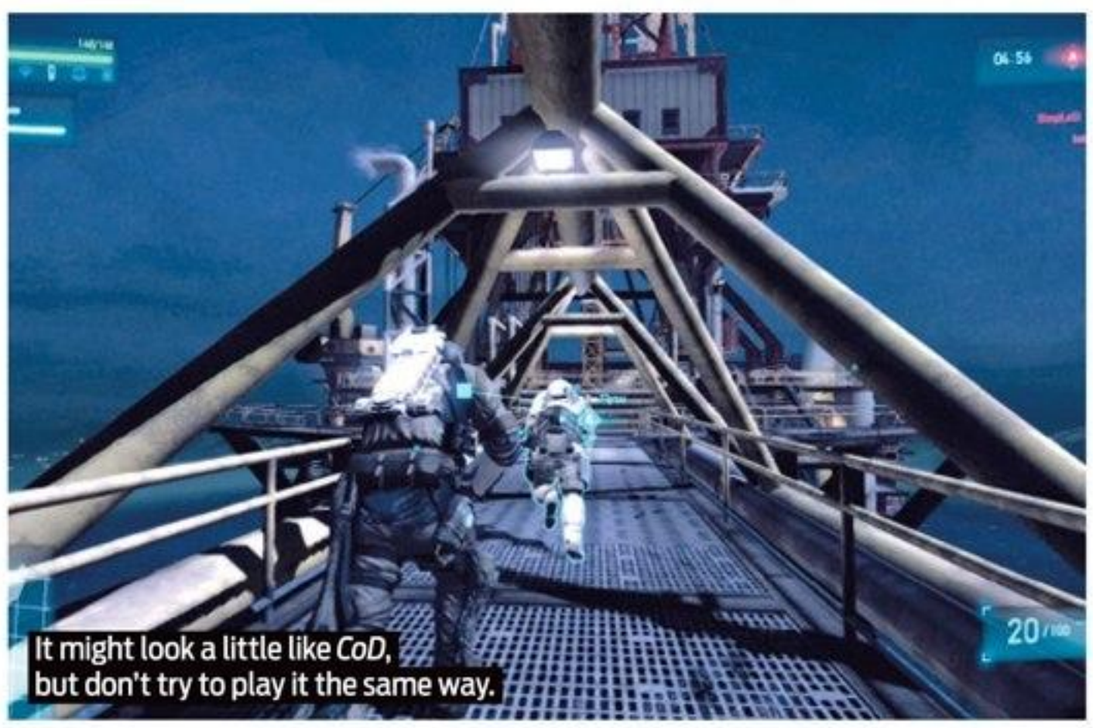


Supporting your squad is almost as satisfying as playing the hero.



It might look a little like *CoD*, but don't try to play it the same way.

flank the enemy team or move in on capture points.

Attacking as part of a well-organized squad can be rewarding. It's satisfying to watch a teammate make a well-executed dash to forward cover while your companions lay down covering fire. It's even better when you're the soldier making a break for it. I'd commonly vault over my low wall into clear ground and see several enemy heads pop out of cover, only to be efficiently plugged by my supporting sniper.

When experienced squads meet, there's deadlock. Both sides camp across from each other, trying to pick off unsupported individuals. These faceoffs can be resolved quickly with a bit of mad science: a robot arm that shoots mircrowaves.

There's a long cooldown on the microwave blast, so it has to be used with care, but it can solve a stalemate in seconds. Powering the device up grants me thermal vision. I can point the microwave field at an enemy direction to boil the blood in their veins, a phenomenon that's mercifully only represented by some visual distortion on their end. I'm vulnerable when the device is deployed, but teammates can use the distraction to mop up distracted foes.

Shoot for loot

The type of special ability you get depends on the class you choose. There are three. Assault soldiers get assault rifles, the microwave arm, or a shield which can be used to charge and knock down enemies. Recon agents get sniper rifles and can scan areas for enemies, highlighting them on everyone's minimap. They can also cloak in short bursts to get the drop on enemies. Specialists can replenish the ammo reserves of nearby friendly soldiers and deploy temporary shield domes that often form the center of a concerted push.

These abilities can be leveled up to increase the duration of their effects. You'll level your Assault, Recon and Specialist profiles separately. Experience earned capping points and killing baddies will push up your overall level in each class, unlocking new guns, helmets and armor pieces for purchase. These can be bought using Requisition Points earned in-game, or with real money.

You'll also get a random loot drop at the end of each game. The quality of the loot depends on how well you performed and can be anything, from a temporary boost that can buff your armor to a new scope for your gun. *GRO*'s experience system places a greater emphasis on teamwork than kill counts. Capping points and supporting buddies will earn much more experience and money than frags.

There's a massive array of customization choices. Guns can have different sights, stocks, barrels and magazines, and you can attach temporary boosters to most of your items to slightly increase their effectiveness. You can boost armor to increase your critical hit resistance, for example, or slightly reduce the damage

Go forth, my tactical marionette.

done by incoming shots.

You'll get to see the impact of these statistical increases in combat. There's a lot of number crunching going on behind each bullet, and *Ghost Recon Online* wants you to know it. Damage figures pour out of enemies as you hit them, and whenever you throw your man into cover, a series of floating percentage figures flash up to tell you exactly how that particular piece of cover is improving your weapon stability and recoil levels. As a sniper, holding your

Your soldier hurls himself onto his belly with the fervor of a war movie extra.

sights still increases your percentage chance of scoring a critical hit. You can actually see that percentage ticking upwards in your scope as you steady your aim.

Enemies go down quickly enough to keep combat feeling punchy and dangerous in spite of this, but this constant numerical bombardment clutters an already busy interface. *Ghost Recon Online*'s fondness for floating numbers and a mad HUD is one of the few elements borrowed from the old *Ghost Recon* games. The spindly lines that show you your squad's location are just about useful enough to be worthwhile, but add a storm of floating damage values, cover stats and the occasional mad boiling microwave field effect and things start to get messy, and more than a little overwhelming when you first jump in.

Laying bare the underlying algorithms of the combat doesn't help to sell the near-future military war setting, either, but *GRO* doesn't seem especially interested in immersing players in a realistic battlefield. There's little backstory or reason attached to objectives, and the industrial environments and urban warzones feel familiar and utilitarian. They are thoughtfully designed, however, and tremendous fun to traverse.

Smooth moves

Ubisoft has nailed the cover system, too. From a crouched run you can press Space to skid gracefully into hiding. Pressing the prone button will cause your soldier to hunker down further, giving him more protection against elevated snipers. From

MOVE UP TAKE TERRITORY WITHOUT TAKING CASUALTIES

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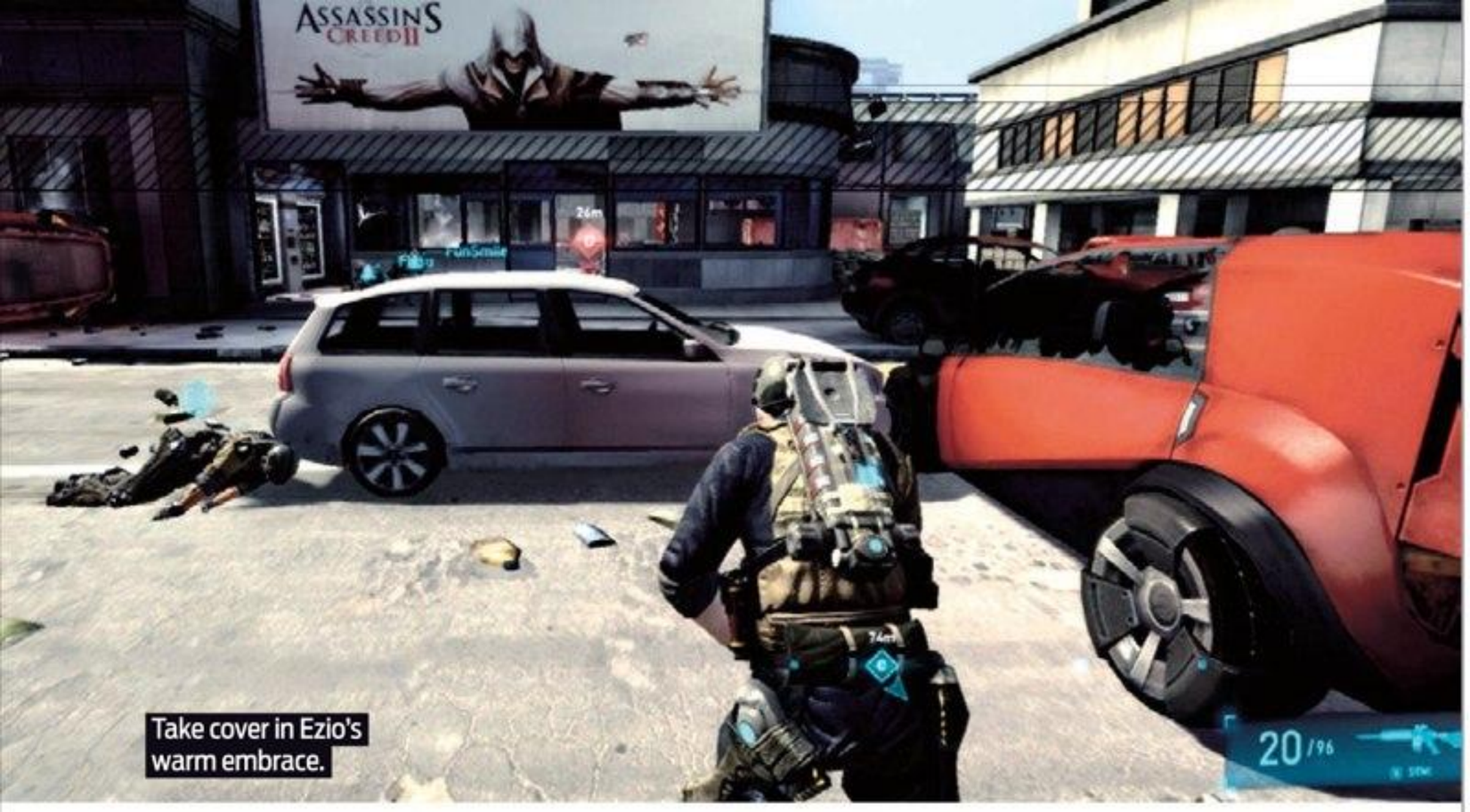

this position your soldier will move around in a desperate scramble. Seeing my soldier's fear only made the bullets zinging overhead even scarier.

Getting in and out of these protected positions feels fluid and reliable. A press of the E key sends you vaulting over the top, a brave move that should only be used when you're sure you're covered. Pressing the prone button while running causes your soldier to hurl himself onto his belly with the fervor of a war movie extra milking his three seconds in the limelight. The whole system is responsive and well animated. It's miles better than *Brink*'s free running, and the best cover system since *Rainbow Six: Vegas*.

Other areas need improvement. Most notably: the guns. In the beta sessions I played, firing on fully automatic sent the barrel leaping skyward, spraying hot lead all over the damn place. The default firing mode was completely useless, but switching to semi-automatic yielded better results. Emptying half a clip at an enemy a few meters away and losing the fight because of insane bullet spread is one of the most infuriating experiences a player can have in a competitive shooter.

This is part of *Ghost Recon Online*'s biggest problem. As a new player coming into the beta completely fresh, my overriding emotion for the first hour was one of burning frustration. Until I'd clicked into the thoughtful, methodical style the game was asking for my experience was full of repetitive, instantaneous deaths at the hands of unseen snipers and assault warriors with superior scopes.

Even once I'd figured out how everything worked, inexperienced teammates could still disrupt things. When camped near a well-defended control point, I watched a low level ally skip into the open and charge their lines. "I was like you once kid," I thought as I watched him die. "If only you knew what I know now."

That learning curve is the problem. Players booting up a free-to-play game aren't going to take the time to learn its systems as they might with a game they've just bought. *Ghost Recon Online* can be brutal, and without more instruction for new players, I can see thousands of shooter fans bouncing straight off it.

It's going to be an incredible year for F2P shooters. *Tribes: Ascend* is fast, accessible and beautiful, *PlanetSide 2*'s huge scraps offer an impressive spectacle, and *Firefall* will have a gorgeous world and huge jetpacks. A tough, tactical shooter like this will have to work hard to compete with such colorful competitors. *Ghost Recon Online* isn't big, or especially showy, but there's a tense, clever shooter hiding under that mad interface that'll reward you for persevering. In the end, I'm glad I did. ■ ***Tom Senior***

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The Ariel Atom is essentially a cage on wheels.

Cars are built with an average of 250K polygons, compared to 30K in *Shift*.

So detailed you can see the carbon fiber weave on the suspension struts.

PROJECT CARS

NEW INFO Slightly Mad's fan-funded racing sim is growing

For Slightly Mad Studios, the *Need for Speed* name was clearly a mixed blessing when it produced *NFS: Shift*. A whole garage full of licensed cars and circuits, plus a guaranteed baseline level of success thanks to the brand, had to be weighed against the fact that racing-game-by-committee didn't fit with Slightly Mad's hardline simulations.

With *Project CARS*, a community funded game started before Tim Schafer made it fashionable, Slightly Mad is free to create the racing game both it and its community want. The current version is a Frankenstein of design—one of the regularly released builds that "investors" get to play with—but it reveals a lot about how the team's approach.

The handful of cars currently available manage to span both the entire horsepower range (from razzy go-karts to thinly disguised F1 machines) and several decades of racing machinery at once. *Project CARS* will eventually allow you to work your way through an entire racing career, building a team and selecting disciplines which suit your racing talents. Commonality comes from the fact that

You can identify the individual rivets holding the engine together.

every single vehicle is recreated to a startling degree of accuracy—you can identify the individual rivets holding the engine together and components like driveshafts and suspension coils rotate and bounce exactly as in real life. There's mechanical logic to everything that happens, which makes it much harder to blame handling quirks when you hit a wall for the eighth time.

You'll want to persevere. Slightly Mad's games have never been short on thrills and while it can occasionally feel like all four tires have been simultaneously transformed into bars of butter, slinging a high downforce racer through a sweeping corner as the rubber subtly squirms underneath you makes you feel like a bona-fide hero.

With simulations, it's often easy to forget that there are two parts to a racing car. The metallic whirring mechanics and the soft, fleshy pilot sawing away at the steering wheel. Slightly Mad is as fastidious when it comes to replicating the latter as it is the former. While there will still be moments where you're cursing an AI driver for accidentally pushing you off the track, in *Project CARS* it'll be because that particular driver has a tendency toward opportunist overtaking moves rather than a lack of situational awareness. This being a work in progress, if you've dropped the cash on membership you can help tune the game's AI yourself by experimenting with a series of sliders hidden in the difficulty menu.

The departure of the *Need For Speed*

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DEVELOPER
Slightly Mad Studios

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What happens when racing drivers stubbornly refuse to ask for directions.

I think the light blue button triggers the oil slick.

Modern doohickeys like KERS and DRS will make an appearance.

license (and its accompanying budget) isn't all roses and kittens. *Project CARS* returns to the drawing board as far as official manufacturers and locations are concerned. Don't expect to be rolling Ferraris and Porsches around—at the moment the vast majority of vehicles and tracks are non-copyright-infringing lookalikes rather than the real deal.

Of course, these cover versions are close enough that if the official Audi license is secured, it'll take little more than a texture swap to add the marque's Le Mans and DTM contenders to the game. It's a similar story with the circuits—Belgian Forest is transparently the Spa circuit, Connecticut Hill is Watkins Glen, and so on. It's the same trick that rFactor pulled and it's less obtrusive than fictionalized versions of recognizable vehicles because, aside from the names, they're beautifully designed versions of the real tracks.

Technologically, the proprietary *Shift 2 Unleashed* engine runs beautifully, apparently allows for your PC to reappraise the forces on your car 600 times per second, and is laden with more novel visual fluff than a *Star Wars* re-release. The odd cardboard cut-out tree remains, but if the tracks are to match the staggering fidelity of the vehicles, we hope they'll be cut between now and the 2013 release.

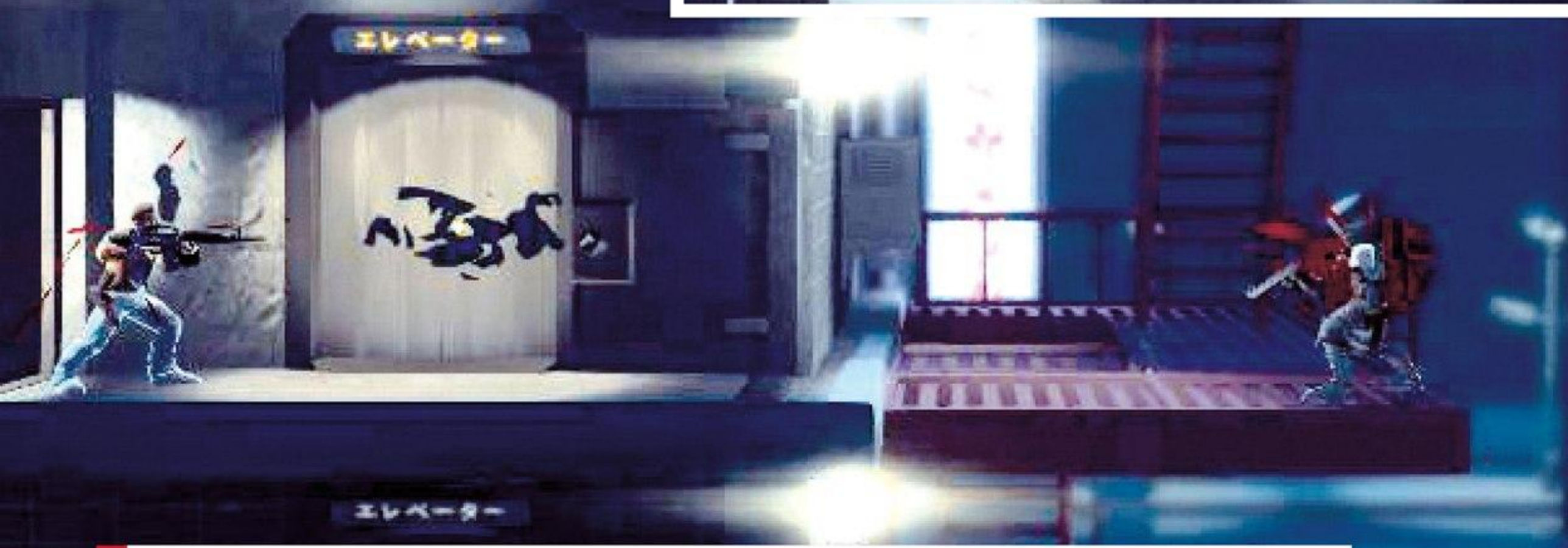
Because the game's being built with its dressing gown wide open, it's difficult to treat what exists at the moment as much more than a statement of intent. If Slightly Mad sticks to its promise of delivering what the fans want, it could also change dramatically en route to release. What's there, though, hints at a development team freed from the shackles of a restrictive partnership and indulging themselves as fans of the genre rather than commissioned contract workers. The brakes are off and while that could result in a huge, messy accident, it could just as likely lead to a glorious victory lap. ■ ***Mike Channell***

Release 2013

The AI will be some of the smartest ever seen in a racing game.

It was originally called *Shoot*. That name was scrapped—you stab and bash enemies too.

I'm killer in the kitchen.



THE SHOWDOWN EFFECT

PLAYED IT Dodge bullets and fight friends in a world of '80s action movies

We aren't privy to many brawlers on PC. Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros.* and other "2.5D" multiplayer beat-'em-ups have traditionally been a couch-friendly affair. No more, says the maker of *Magicka*. The team previously responsible for the chaotic co-op RPG is now bringing its talents to bear on this eight-player, side-scrolling arena shooter.

"*The Showdown Effect* is very heavily inspired by '80s action movies," says Emil Englund, the design director at Arrowhead. "The whole idea behind the game is to experience that outrageousness, the coolness and one-liners."

That's immediately apparent when I pick up the game. In seconds, I'm barrel-rolling through a fourth-story window—narrowly dodging an exploding RPG as I do—and springing off the walls on the way down. As I catch my breath, a hail of machine gun fire streaks from a nearby alley; I frantically backflip around the bullet stream before accidentally rolling into a kitchen. I hear footsteps coming closer. Both my assailant and I unload our Uzis at each other, alternately dodging and firing, until our ammo is spent. Then we throw the dry guns at one another. Bare-handed, we grab the knives and furnishings in the kitchen. I finally finish off him off with a barstool. Only six more to go, I think, as I start bandaging up my bleeding limbs.

My assailant and I unload our Uzis at each other, alternately dodging and firing.

Showdown's characters are agile as hell; a double-tap makes them sprint, and they can slide, roll, dive and jump, blasting away all the time. Englund hopes to have the dive function improved in the final game, so you can dive *at* other players and knock their weapons out of their hands, or even knock them through windows—and then tumble together through glass-filled air.

On top of this, the dodge button renders you invulnerable as long as you hold it down, and uses up a blue meter. It kind of operates like a blocking mechanic from a fighting game: it increases the lifetime of the players substantially—as long as they remember to use it. Get hit and you might start bleeding, necessitating stopping and bandaging— not something you want to do when there are seven other action heroes running around the level who know where you are.

All that player agility is necessary given two things: the absolute anime overblowness of the weapon animations and particle effects (inspired by *Ghost in the Shell*), which means players will unload clip after clip just for the look of the thing (before tossing the empty gun at the opponent in order to stun them—there's no reloading in '80s action flicks) and the presence of rocket launchers, which are

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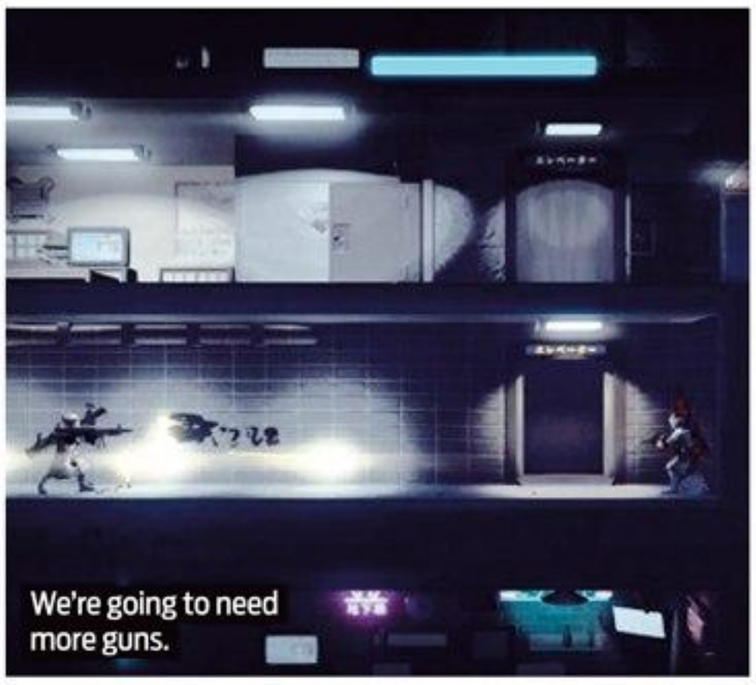
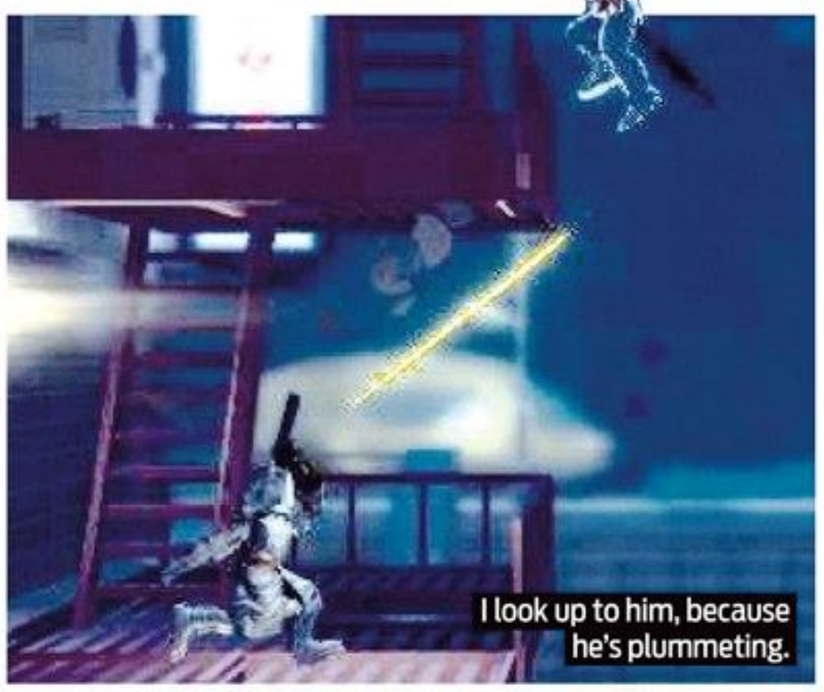
Essential skills: jumping through plate glass windows.

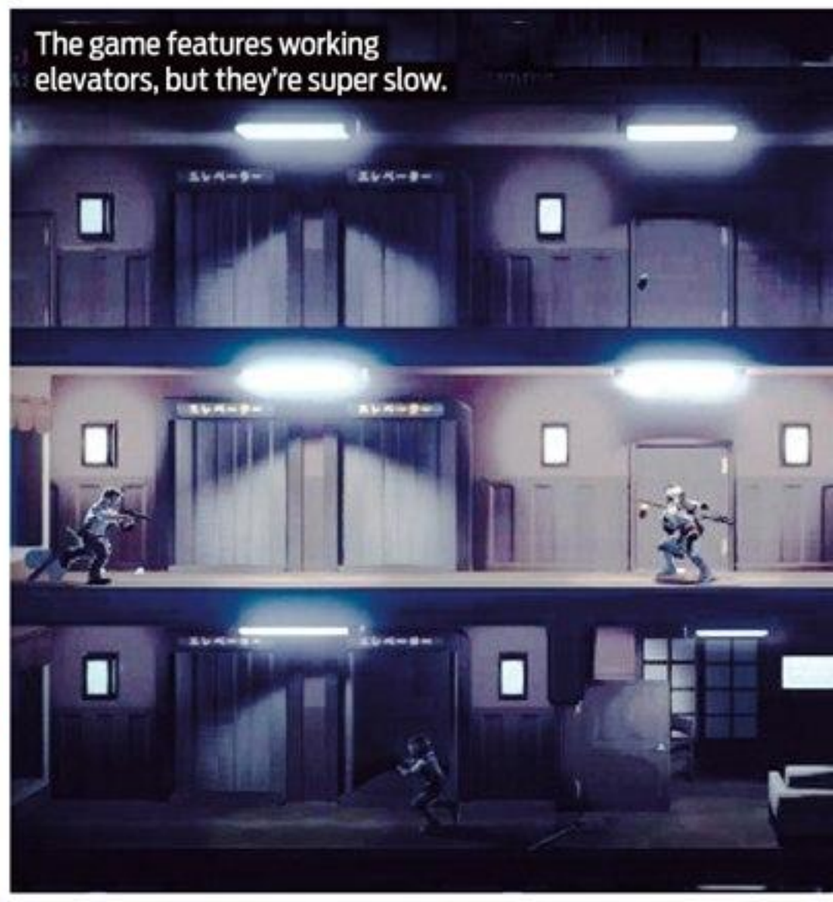
Essential skills: dodging rockets.



We're going to need more guns.



I look up to him, because he's plummeting.



The game features working elevators, but they're super slow.

super-slow loading, firing, and aiming.

Englund tells us that although the initial arsenal will be traditional gritty '80s kit—shotguns, Uzis, M16s, assault rifles, grenades, katanas—they may introduce more esoteric killing devices later, including laser guns, Gauss guns, lightsabers and a guided missile.

Players can also grab environmental objects to finish off their enemies, such as fire extinguishers, frying pans, broomsticks, barstools and kitchen knives. "The whole point of the combat is that it's contextualised," Englund says. "Everything makes you feel like you're creating that cinematic scene."

Another key device is the one-liner. Though it wasn't included in the build I got to play, players will be able to quip to buff themselves or complete game objectives. "In certain game modes, you earn points for pulling off one-liners at certain moments," Englund says. "Or you may regain health when bandaging and using a one-liner, because you're just that tough. I think the original inspiration is *Action: Quake II*."

Several game modes are promised, before the straight Last Man Standing I saw, but the team can't give us more details yet. "Of course we will have game modes that reward certain styles of play," Englund says, "but it's important that you feel like you didn't do something for points—you did it because it felt right."

They may introduce more esoteric killing devices later, including laser guns.

There will be DLC, although it's likely to be just visual and audio customizations, such as extra characters to play with. The various names that the team threw at us included the Stolen Identity Guy (outrageous Austrian accent), the Tired New York Cop (day before retirement), the Trenchcoat Guy—and there will be as many female as male archetypes, with their own voices and one-liners. Characters will progress outside of the combat arena to unlock even more customization options.

There will only be two settings at launch, each having multiple levels including the grimy eight-floor neo-Tokyo apartment block that I saw, which was straight out of a Hong Kong action movie. We're told that the other setting is Medieval England. Further levels will be given away as free DLC which, given that *Showdown* will be about 10 bucks, is very generous indeed. ■

Dan Griliopoulos

Release 2012

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MMO EXTRA

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FEATURE STORY

WELCOME TO TERA

TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT THE WORLD AS TO OFFER

The world of TERA supports a new generation looking to reshape the world—end old evils, erase old rivalries, and live together as one people rather than a collection of squabbling racial kingdoms. Banded together, this new generation hopes to defeat the invading forces looking to take over their precious home.

BORN THIS WAY

PICK THE RACE THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU!

(*Character from left to right)

Aman: Proud and strong, Amani are more resistant to damage-over-time abilities.

Baraka: The peaceful, noble Baraka are resistant to immobility.

Castanic: Bold and brash, Castanics take less damage from falling.

Elin: Elin, divine children of the goddess Elinu, swim faster than other races.

High Elf: The magical high elves can fully replenish their MP once every few hours.

Human: The optimistic, curious humans take less damage in PvP when low on HP.

Popori: Popori are fast, fickle, and deadly, gaining speed boosts twice an hour.

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WHAT MAKES TERA DIFFERENT (AND AWESOME)?

Looking through the races, classes, and world doesn't give you the full picture on TERA. It's more than the sum of its awesome parts—much more.

ACTION-PACKED COMBAT

In most MMOs your typical battles unfold like a game of whack-a-mole. You sit there, tapping buttons when they light up, slowly dealing damage as everyone stands still. That's not combat—it's boring. TERA's battles are much more in-your-face than a typical MMO, bringing the action of a hack-and-slash into MMOs in a very big way. You'll be actively making attacks as you block enemy blows and roll around the battlefield. Standing still is a recipe for disaster, so be sure to keep moving!

BIG-ASS MONSTERS

Think bigger. No, seriously, bigger. Usually the only big baddies you fight in an MMO are the raid bosses. Who wants to wait for that? In TERA the big is thrown at you much more frequently, so keep an eye out for enemies that'll dwarf your character. Then again, they're so big you'll likely find them whether or not you're even looking.

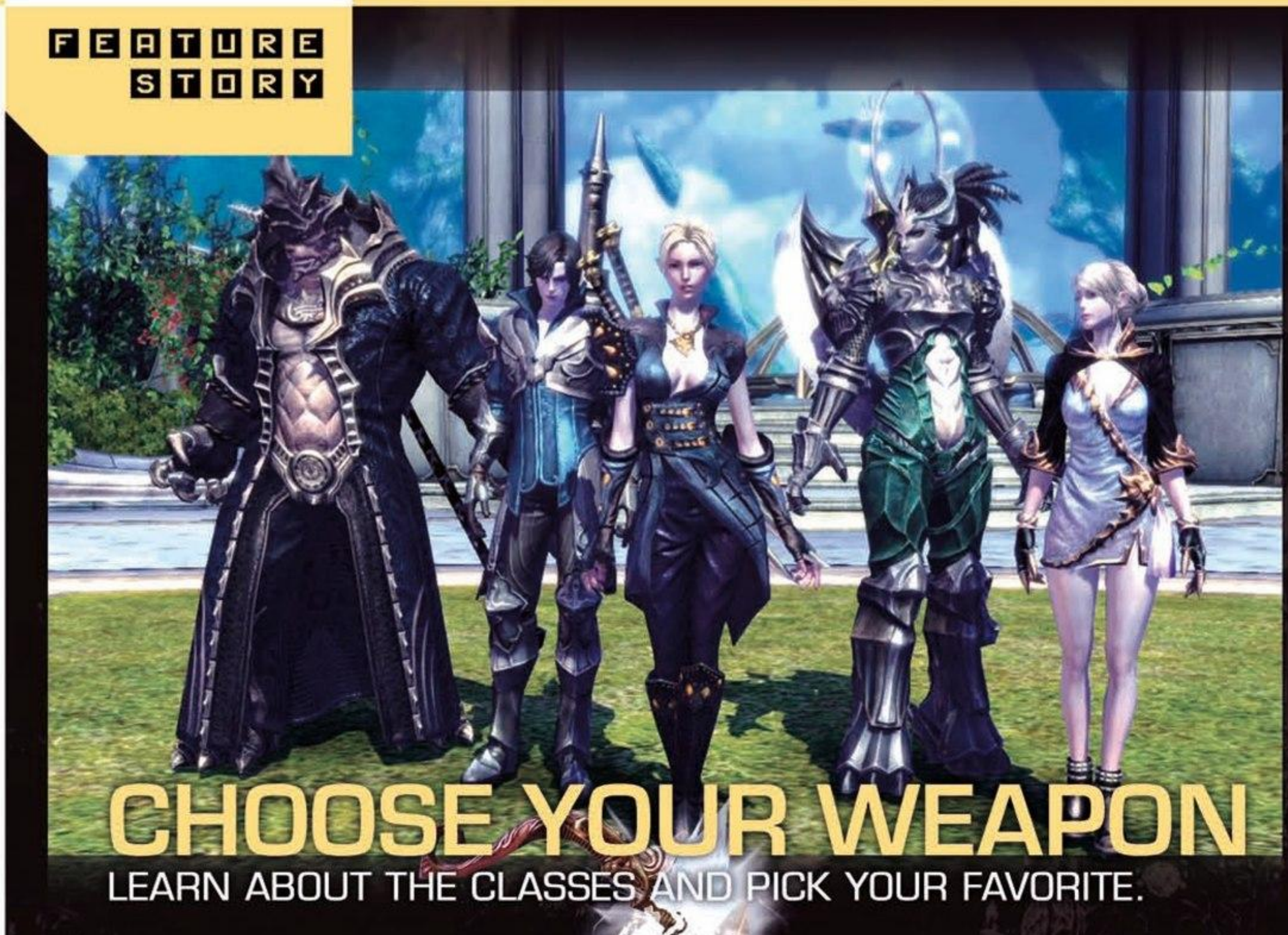
ALONE OR WITH FRIENDS

You're obviously going to love playing TERA with the thousands of other people logging in every day, but every so often you'll likely want to run solo. Good news: all of TERA's classes are suited for both, coming with skills that make them useful in both group and individual affairs.

MASSIVE PVP BATTLES

Who cares about fighting with friends when you can fight against them? TERA's PvP system is robust, with everything you've come to expect from the genre, including different instanced PvP arenas. But even more interesting is the open-world PvP, including both traditional battles and the awesome guild-versus-guild wars. Declare war on a rival guild to label their people kill on sight, turning grudges into all out battles.

FEATURE STORY



CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON

LEARN ABOUT THE CLASSES AND PICK YOUR FAVORITE.

Picking your class is one of the most important decisions you make when rolling up a new character in an MMO. You don't want to choose one only to find out it doesn't play the way you'd like, and you don't want to end up playing a different role than you expected.

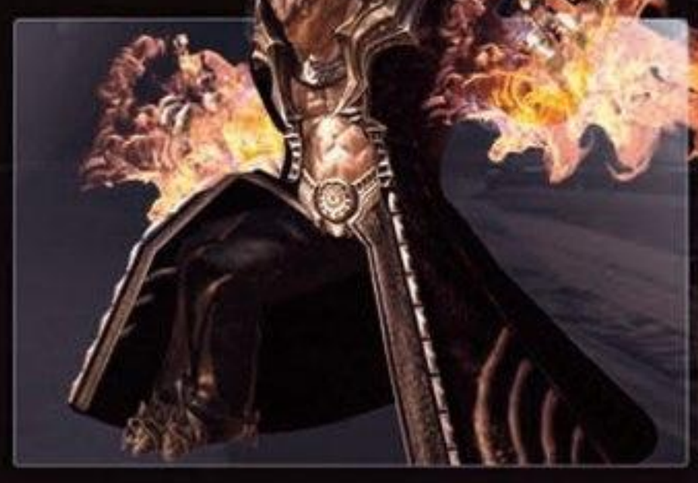
To make it easier, we've put together a class guide to help you choose the class that's best for you, because let's be honest: you're going to be playing your character for a long time.

Archer: The Ranged DPS God

The Archer is your typical ranged DPS class, launching a barrage attacks from afar while enemies scramble to make their way toward you. If they make it, you've still got several options: you can use traps to slow them down, poisons to lay on some damage over time, or your melee weapons to start stabbing away.

TIPS

An archer's arrows effortlessly punch through armor, consume foes in fire-bursts, and trap them in spiderwebs.



Sorcerer: The Glass Cannon

Use powerful magic to lay down some massive damage on your foes, and use some minor crowd-control abilities to keep the baddies off your teammates. Sorcerers are the nukes of TERA, with a focus on killing as many things as possible as quickly as possible. With powerful area-of-effect abilities, that shouldn't be too hard, should it?

TIPS

Sorcerers are artillery. They deliver power against targets with pinpoint accuracy or punishing barrages.

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Lancer: The Armored Tank

Leave the damage to the Archers and Sorcerers. Lancers aren't about dealing massive DPS (though they can do a good amount when they try)—they're about standing their ground and serving as the last line of defense between monsters and their team, blocking attacks with shields and armor.

TIPS

Besides pinning down foes and shrugging off their attacks, lancers can drive forward, drilling through anything in front of them.

Berserker: The Damage Juggernaut

Want to do the most damage in the game? Of course you do. Just pick up a two-handed axe and roll a Berserker. The class deals the most damage of any other melee fighter, knocking foes around like a boss. They're also good back-up tanks with their heavy armor and ability to soak up incoming damage.

TIPS

Combat feeds the berserker. Moving from fight to fight, berserkers get stronger with every blow of the axe.

Slayer: The Deadly Duelists

If you're looking to get up close and personal with your enemies, the Slayer might be for you. The melee DPS class uses two-handed swords and light armor, dodging enemy blows and performing roundhouse sword attacks and flipping around the battlefield.

TIPS

Wide-sweeping attacks mow down foes, agile dodges flank them, and leaping backflip kicks stun them and open distance.

Warrior: The Dodge Tank

What's the best way to stay alive? Don't get hit. Duh. The Warrior can deliver nice damage with twin swords, dealing more DPS than most other tanks while still being effective thanks to agility and light armor.

TIPS

A warrior looks ahead, never behind, diving into the middle of the fray and mowing down opposition.

Mystic: The Off-healing Buffer

The Mystic isn't your typical healing class. While dropping healing orbs helps keep your allies alive, don't underestimate the ability to buff the party and summon minions. Most important of all, however, is crowd control, which keeps the battlefield from becoming too chaotic.

TIPS

Mystics fight at close quarters, healing and fortifying allies while draining and destroying enemies.

Priest: The Classic Healbot

Groups can sometimes survive without a ton of DPS or a dedicated tank,but without a healer, the group is as good as dead. The Priest keeps this from becoming an issue, dropping down the most powerful heals in the game while still dealing enough DPS to solo enemies.

TIPS

Priests call down divine fire, shock their enemies with lightning bolts, and inflict plagues.

FEATURE STORY

SPEAKING OF BIG-ASS MONSTERS

BIG BAD BOOGIE-MONSTERS ARE A STAPLE OF TERA. HERE'S HOW TO TAKE ONE DOWN.

NAGA MARAUDER (* image above)

When fighting the naga marauder, notice two of its more interesting moves—its spin attack and its jumping charge. Keeping the camera zoomed out for these fights is essential for identifying when each attack is coming, so you can dodge or block accordingly. Don't chase them as they jump, because you'll find they often move too close to other monsters—and that only makes the fight harder.

TIPS FROM THE DEVELOPERS

Basilisk:
This beast is best attacked with a group. Be ready to dodge its l eap-and-crash move.

Disc Reaper:
The hip shaking gives this monster's attack away. The flying saw is easy enough to dodge when you know it's coming.

Kumas:
This creature will raise its arm before punching the ground—and you, if you're still standing in front of it.

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METER

3 MONTHS AWAY

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

Inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, this narrative-driven shooter takes you to Dubai and asks you to make tough moral choices while combating your fellow US soldiers.

Release JUNE 26, 2012

DARKSIDERS II

Literally take the reigns of the Rider of Death in THQ's next entry in its Four Horseman of the Apocalypse tetralogy. You weren't seriously calling the four-part series a "quadrilogy" were you?

Release JUNE 26, 2012

JET SET RADIO HD

If you hear the words Beat, Gum, or Tab and don't immediately think of turn-of-the-century graffiti hipsters, then you really need to educate yourself with Sega's remastered classic.

Release JUNE 2012

RETRO CITY RAMPAGE

Revisit your roots with this throwback to a much more radical time! Enjoy all your favorite bits and bleeps from the 1980s crammed into this open-world action parody.

Release MAY 2012

6 MONTHS AWAY

MEDAL OF HONOR: WARFIGHTER

Warfighter: It's not just a name, it's an occupation... Wow, that's a terrible tagline! Sorry, all we know about the latest *MoH* is that it's set in Somalia and the Philippines.

Release OCTOBER 23, 2012

BIOSHOCK INFINITE

As if our anticipation for the next *BioShock* weren't already "sky high," a recent trailer showed off The Mobile Patriot, a lethal piece of robotic propaganda resembling Pres. Washington!

Release OCTOBER 16, 2012

TOMB RAIDER

Lady Croft's upcoming reboot owes more to Bear Grylls than Indiana Jones. Not only will she have to craft her own tools and weapons, she'll have to forage for food and water on a desolate island.

Release Q3 2012

WAR OF THE ROSES

Head back to 15th century England and toss yourself right in the midst of warring Houses Lancaster and York, where you'll stab more faces than a disgruntled acupuncturist.

Release Q3 2012

9+ MONTHS AWAY

DOUBLE FINE ADVENTURE

Having raised over 3 million dollars, Tim Schafer's crowdsourced game is very much *GO*! Hard details are scarce, but Double Fine is updating donors weekly.

Release TBA 2012

XCOM

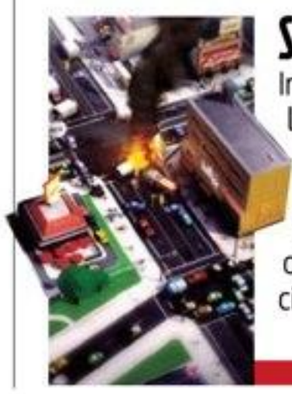
Although this FPS reboot was originally set for release last year, it's been pushed all the way to 2013! Oh well, at least we'll have a reimaging of the classic *X-Com: UFO Defense* to keep us company.

Release TBA 2013

PLANETSIDE 2

Many of you have wondered how *PlanetSide 2* will take shape. Well, SOE offered a look at thirty minutes of gameplay footage at GDC 2012 and it was glorious! See it all at pcgamer.com

Release TBA 2013



SIMCITY

In case you couldn't tell by last month's cover, city simulation is coming back, baby! Thanks to Maxis' Glassbox engine, thousands of individual Sims will dictate city events instead of... math?

Release TBA 2013

BEST GUESS

Assasin's Creed III
While the first three *Assassin's Creed* games came to the PC four months after other versions, *AC: Revelations* was only one week late. We think *AC III* has a good shot at arriving on all platforms simultaneously on October 30th.

ON YOUR RADAR THE TOP 13 MOST-ANTICIPATED PC GAMES

1. DIABLO III
2. **STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM**
3. GRAND THEFT AUTO V
4. TOMB RAIDER
5. SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V: GODS & KINGS
6. RESIDENT EVIL 6
7. GHOST RECON: ONLINE
8. BIOSHOCK: INFINITE
9. ASSASSIN'S CREED III
10. BORDERLANDS 2
11. STAR TREK: THE GAME
12. MAX PAYNE 3
13. GAME OF THRONES

"*Starcraft II: HotS* is even more important than the next *WoW* expansion."

– Viswar Directivty, via Twitter

"How *Heart of the Swarm* is handled will make or break fan loyalty to Blizzard. Let's hope they don't condemn their new e-sport to an early death."

– Casey Adrey, via Twitter

Source: Ipsos OTX GamePlan Insights. Top titles based on purchase intent are collected via a weekly tracking study of 1,000 active gamers in the US between the ages of 13-59. Since launching in 2008, GamePlan has collected data on over 100,000 gamers across 2,500+ titles.

ADWEN

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FUTURE TIME

GUILD WARS 2 asks big questions about the future of the MMO ***by Chris Thursten***

You don't need to hate the way things are to look forward to change. The *Guild Wars 2* hype has set it up as a rebuttal to the way things have traditionally been done in MMOs: a rejection of unchanging worlds, heroism without consequence, and epic battles that are more about logistics than bravado.

These expectations have been generated as much by the gaming community as by NCsoft's marketing. Simply by promising to do things differently, *Guild Wars 2* has found itself nominated as the savior of its genre. Lead designer Eric Flannum is more modest. "What we tried to do was take a look at what an MMO could be, and try to make it appeal to not only people who love MMOs but also people who maybe haven't tried an MMO for various reasons."

As someone who likes MMOs – and who isn't necessarily convinced they need saving – I'm treating my uninterrupted weekend with the game as an opportunity to see how far it can deliver on its big ideas. If it can convince me that we really have been doing everything wrong since *World of Warcraft*, then ArenaNet could be on to something.

I opt to play a female human warrior. My choice of race is down to the fact that the human starting area – lush farmland under attack by roaming centaur warbands – is the most frequently cited example of *GW2*'s evolving "events"system, where quests are thrown out in favor of dynamic objectives based on the independent actions of players, monsters and friendly NPCs. I become a mail-clad warrior, meanwhile, because I want my character to put some damn clothes on. The land of Tyria is populated by clear-faced underwear models, and it's an uphill struggle to make a female character who doesn't look 15 years old. The best I can do is a kind of Disney Joan of Arc, a waif-thin airbrushed beauty wielding a sword bigger than she is. I avoid spellcasters entirely because there's only so much Renaissance-themed fetish gear I can handle.

It's a negative first impression, albeit one that's down to personal preference. The first *Guild Wars* had a similar look, after all, and it's classier than *Aion* or *Lineage*. As with the rest of *GW2*'s art direction there's an obvious investment of thought, detail and style—it just won't be to everyone's taste.

Yours sincerely

I'm asked a series of questions about my character's life, from the serious—her biggest regret—to the mundane, such as deciding what kind of helmet she wears. These choices are written up as a letter in the first person, describing the kind of person my character is. Signing the letter establishes her name, and we're off. It's a lovely system, and successful in making me feel ownership of my character straight away.

After a hand-painted introduction I'm dropped into the village of Shaemoor during a centaur attack. This is an instanced crisis, the kind that many MMOs begin with – but what's striking is that no one immediately tells me what to do. I rush towards a nearby player and help her take down a spear-wielding centaur. Control-wise, everything is where I expect it to be. I'm equipped with a one-handed sword, and hammering the "1" key makes things die. So far, so MMO.

An NPC shouts at me to get to

the inn, and a waypoint appears on my minimap. I start to notice quirks in the combat system: while I can target enemies, I don't need to do so in order to hit them, and pressing the attack key causes my character to swing her sword regardless of whether she's in range. Damage is based on stats, but hitting a foe is partly twitch-based—an observation backed up by the evade system that lets you double-tap a movement key to roll out of the way.

When I reach the inn I enter a brief conversation with an NPC. These sequences are presented as one-on-one dialogs against a painted backdrop. Players are voiced, but you don't have any choice about what they say: it's not *The Old Republic*. I'm told to help out at a nearby guardhouse, and off I go again.

On the way, I loot a two-handed sword from a centaur warrior. Equipping it, my abilities immediately change. Every weapon in *Guild Wars 2* has its own set of special moves, which range from area-of-effect attacks to throwing a greatsword like a four-foot steel boomerang. Moves are unlocked as you rack up kills with the weapon, so you have to work to access the full potential of a given loadout. It's very straightforward in practice, and it's impressive that only a few minutes into the game I'm already playing differently to the hammer-and-shield warrior next to me.

I'm the first player to reach the guard-house, and as I arrive a message pops up: event started, defend the gate. Centaurs charge in from the hills and, of course, I fight them. I've got no kill quota to hit, and I don't actually know how long the siege will last. More players join, and the centaur onslaught increases in intensity—I suspect the game is scaling up the encounter to match the amount of defenders, but my focus is on murdering horse-men, not mechanics. I'm paying attention to my goals as a character rather than my goals as a player.

Guild Wars 2's events system is starting to make sense. "Events are very visual," Flannum says. "They don't require a lot of explanation. You run into a city and there are centaurs attacking everyone—you kind of know what to do, right?"

Eventually the gate opens, and I receive a gold ranking for my contribution to the fight. This grants an experience bonus as well as karma, a currency earned through events that can be traded for loot later on. This is *GW2*'s replacement for traditional quest rewards. The tutorial builds to an encounter on a scale that most MMOs reserve for their late-game, and one I don't want to spoil.

Fast forward

Three days later, my character wakes up in a land still recovering from the attack. Normally, this is where I'd be given a quest line to start on, or at the very least a crowd of NPCs with icons over their heads. Instead, there's only one: a scout, whose icon is a spyglass. Talking to him boots up the map, and he highlights various hotspots. These are places where adventurers are always needed, and form the bread-and-butter of *GW2*'s content. Each of these locations has an NPC in need and a range of tasks that can assist them. In the farmlands around Shaemoor, my only objective is simply to help somebody.

A nearby farmer is having trouble with giant worms. I run around stomping their lairs, sometimes whacking the grubs that emerge to defend them. When I can't find a lair, I pick up bundles of feed and tend to the farmer's cattle: all this contributes to a progress bar, which when filled indicates that I've completed that request. Doing so turns the farmer into a friend, earns me a small pile of coins, and allows me to buy items from him in return for karma.

Engineers use gadgets and guns to control mobs.

I'm not saying I'd buy a summer home, but the trees are lovely.

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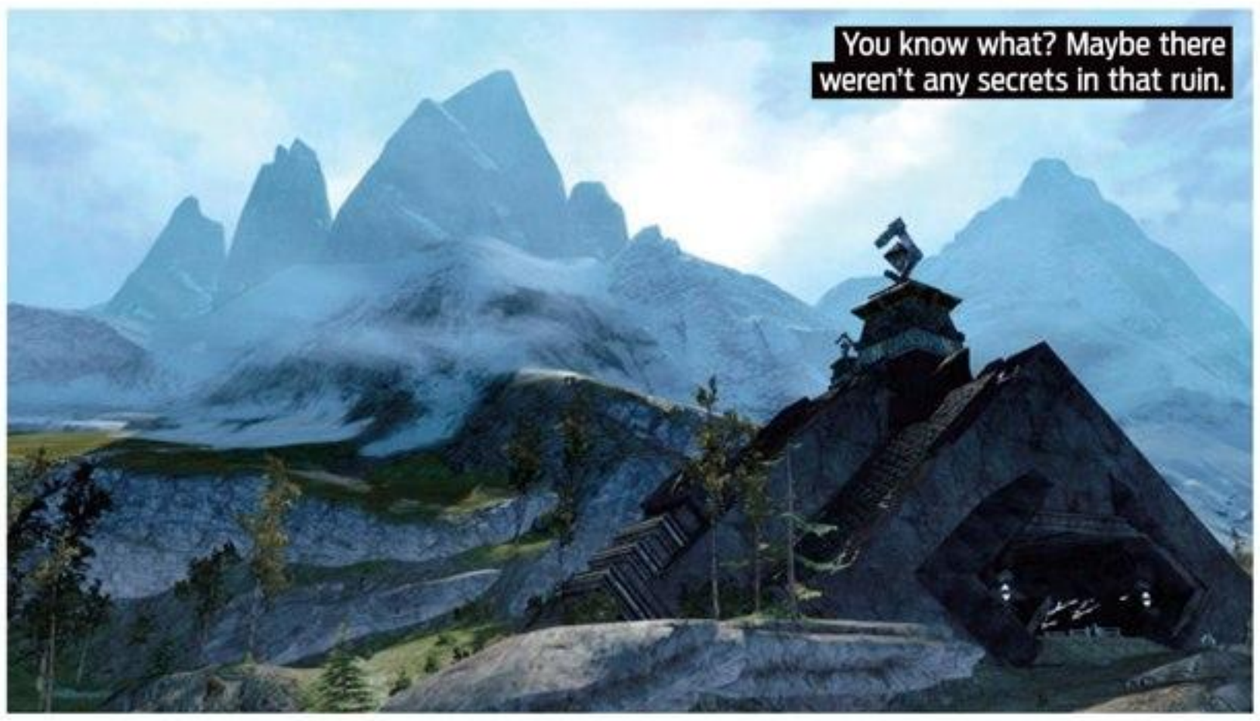

DECK BUILDING Skills, explained

Skills are useful powers that fill out numbers 6 to 0 on your action bar, with slots unlocking as you level up. Progression is less about getting the most powerful abilities and more about being able to build more versatile "hands."

1 HEALING
Your healing ability always restores a chunk of health, but which one you choose to take into battle may also have another effect, like providing passive health regeneration or removing bleeds or debuffs. Decisions decisions.

2 UTILITY
Utility skills grant you abilities that your current weapon does not - charge moves, AoE stuns, and buffs for your allies. How you set these up will determine whether you're a solo killing machine or group-focused team player.

3 ELITE
Elite skills are unlocked at level 30, and are specific to certain classes. They're like extreme versions of utility skills: Warriors can unlock a banner that revives nearby teammates, or choose to transform into a rock-hurling giant.

4 LOCKED
The chevron on a locked skill indicates the points needed to unlock it. These are earned when you level up or granted by challenges in the wild. It's up to you whether to get lots of cheap skills or save up for the big ones.

While I'm at it, the "new event" notification flashes again. The queen worm has surfaced – a gargantuan creature that I work alongside other players to take down. I'm unable to tell whether my grub-stomping is what caused this event to trigger, and in the hours that follow I see the queen frequently whenever I'm passing by—but there's a tangible sense of moment, albeit one that occurs on a reliable cycle.

Helping out in Shaemoor unlocks the next stage in my personal story, a more traditional quest line that is tied to the choices I made at character creation. As I chose the "commoner" origin, I'm sent to visit friends in a poor area of the city that subsequently becomes my home instance. These are private areas filled with merchants who can't be found anywhere else, which evolve over time as you progress.

The home instance only takes up a small part of Divinity's Reach, the human capital city. It's a huge circular network of plazas, temples and walkways, populated by dozens of wandering NPCs. It feels like a living city in a way that reminds me of older MMOs, particularly *EverQuest*—and while it provides convenient access to all of the vendors and trainers you'd expect, there are secrets to be found by wandering around. Popping down a back alley, I encounter four familiar NPCs in the middle of an argument: the descendants of *Guild Wars 1*'s NPC henchmen, squabbling over what adventure to go on next.

Outside the city, I roam the wilds helping out wherever I can. Areas are traversed quickly because there's no way to max them out, and therefore no reason to dwell longer than the current situation requires you to. There will always be events going on, however, and it's difficult to fight the temptation to get involved. Also, your level is lowered to match the area you're in, creating a sense of zones never being truly completed, with the exception of the instanced-off areas in your personal story.

These missions operate differently to the class-locked caves and bunkers of *The Old Republic*. When it needs to, *GW2* will teleport you into an instanced version of the area you're currently in so that specific events can take place. Other players and encounters are removed, and straying beyond certain boundaries takes you back to the "real" world. When I was playing them, these

"It builds to an encounter on a scale that most MMOs reserve for their late-game"

missions often caused the difficulty to spike—but this is likely to be rebalanced before release.

Emerging from one such instance, I found myself in a monastery under attack from shadowy creatures. Joining the fray, I helped a mob of other players to close the portals that had opened in the courtyard. It's impressive how quickly spontaneous adventuring like this becomes par for the course – how oblique and boring waiting for a group suddenly seems when there are battles to be fought everywhere.

ArenaNet aren't worried about throwing players of different skill-levels together and hoping for the best. "I think an MMO needs to accommodate all those different play-styles because it's not like they're different players," Flannum argues, "it's the same players at different points in time."

As it turns out, the portal invasion was part of a much longer series of events taking place in a nearby swamp – and one that I almost missed. After the battle I fought solo for a while, killing monsters and rescuing lost explorers. As I was doing this, the group from the monastery were fighting the invasion back to its source. When they did so, an announcement echoed across the zone – "the beast has awakened!"

Off in the distance, I saw something moving through the trees – something big. Emerging in a shallow part of the swamp, I found 20 or so players engaged in a raid-sized fight with the Shadow Behemoth, an enormous half-submerged skeleton that dug its talons into the mud and summoned

Underwater combat involves harpoon guns and breathing masks.

monster-spewing portals all around us. Without waiting for permission, I waded in. As a melee class, there was little I could do against the monster itself, so I set myself to closing portals and protecting the spell-casters. I had unlocked the ability to place a banner that increased the critical hit chance of my allies, so I used this to boost the damage output of a group of ranged characters who were using guns and bows to attack the beast's head. Eventually we brought its skull crashing to the ground, where I and the other melee warriors were able to smash it to pieces.

Team effort

We cooperated wordlessly, matching the capabilities of our characters to the present need without any planning or leadership. When the behemoth fell, a cheer went up. It dropped a glimmering treasure chest, from which everyone received a boon of item upgrades and general-purpose loot. My gold-ranked contribution to the fight earned me half a level and filled me with genuine pride. What was remarkable about this encounter is that it provided top-tier thrills with none of the set-up, none of the stress. This is exactly what ArenaNet is aiming for, Eric Flannum says. "One of the things that we really wanted to avoid was this feeling that the game doesn't really start until max level."

What was remarkable about my time with *GW2* as a whole is that situations like this one—impromptu mass cooperation, with a real sense of a collective experience—came about several times. I have questions about how events will operate when zones are either over or under-populated, but if nothing else my time proves one thing: the system works.

As with any other modern MMO, comparisons with *World of Warcraft* are inevitable. But in this case, not because Blizzard laid the groundwork for all its best ideas. Instead, *GW2* is worth comparing to *WoW* because both games attempt to answer the same question: how do you get the largest amount of people to go on the largest possible adventure? Or more specifically: how do you do *EverQuest* without the nonsense?

World of Warcraft was revolutionary because it moderated *EverQuest*'s punishing excesses. Instancing removed the need to queue for monsters in dungeons; mob "tagging" gave ownership of a kill to the first player to land a hit, reducing the potential for kill-stealing. *GW2*'s event system and emphasis on casual co-op are solutions to these same problems. *Guild Wars 2* feels less like a successor to *WoW* and more like a parallel evolution from a common ancestor. It's an exciting new

A WORLD IN MOTION Navigating the constantly shifting zones

1 The orange circle indicates an event in progress. In this case, these earthworks have been claimed by the centaur and players must retake them.

2 A deactivated waypoint. These teleporters allow you to transport instantly between unlocked areas for a small fee—no lengthy ride required.

3 An empty heart means there's a set of objectives you haven't yet met in a given area. Here, bandits are causing problems for travelers in the area.

4 A spyglass indicates a scout. These NPCs fill out your map for you, giving you the rundown on local trouble and pointing you towards a scrap.

5 This indicates a skill point challenge. These earn you the points to unlock more abilities quicker, making your character more versatile.

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direction for the genre.

It's not, however, without issues. *GW2*'s structure creates a sense of society that *WoW*—with its emphasis on grouping and private adventure—lacks. Conversely, not needing to find players with particular skill-sets means that in my weekend with the game I hardly spoke to anyone, and made no lasting relationships. The circumstances will have played a role in this, but there was none of the development of trust and respect that goes with knowing, for example, that someone is a great healer. It will be great if players get to become friends without being forced, but it would be nice to see some stronger social incentives on release.

Whether or not *GW2* is the savior some want it to be will be down to the individual. Its big ideas are subtle enough to pass by anyone who isn't attuned to the way MMOs usually operate, yet substantial enough to unsettle players invested in the status quo. It's player-driven both in the sense that its users determine the state of its content, but also in that it doesn't offer the satisfaction of finishing an area before moving on to the next. It's constantly in motion, and as such you're asked to be far more proactive in seeking out your fun.

What's exciting about *Guild Wars 2* is that it returns the emphasis of the MMO to having fun on your own terms. Even if the range of events you may encounter is fixed, the array of variables and the possibility of encountering those events with any number of other people creates a huge matrix of potential experiences.

The complexity of ArenaNet's design has resulted in a game that's deceptively simple to play, and one that returns the promise of the MMO to a straightforward question: would you like to go on an adventure? ■

"Its big ideas are substantial enough to unsettle players invested in the status quo"

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GO! GO! GO!

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE is the third *Counter-Strike* in 13 years. We asked Valve: why the new insurgency? ***by Rich McCormick***

Dust—de_dust to give it its regal title—is *Counter-Strike* at its most culturally pervasive.

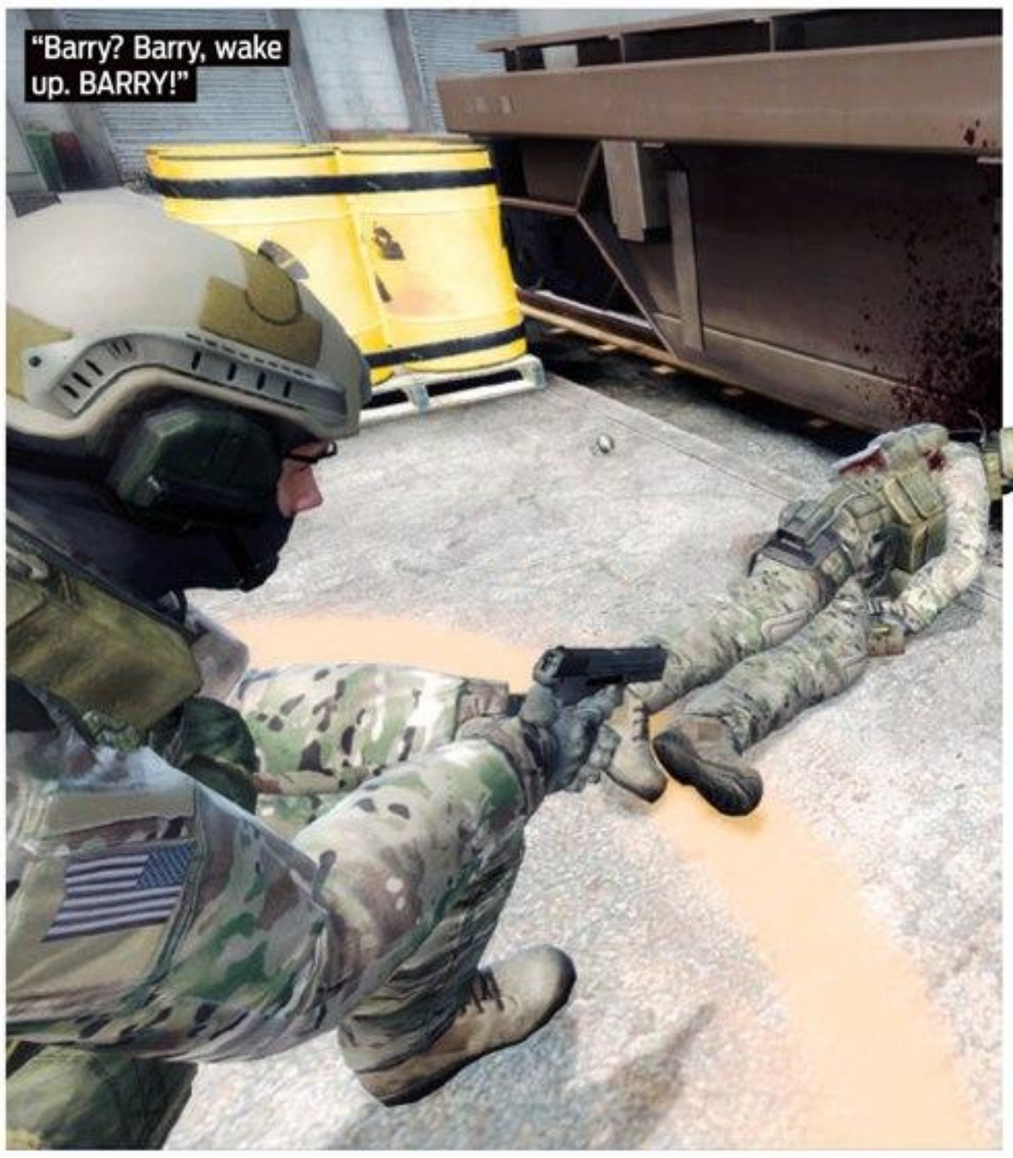
The mustard yellow map that separates Terrorists and Counter-Terrorists with two tunnels has seen incalculable hours of playtime. But as players got better and tactics were honed, Dust's weaknesses became apparent. The Terrorists were on the wrong end of a long, fraught tunnel from their enemies. *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*'s project lead, Valve's Ido Magal, is succinct: "it was impossible, as a terrorist, to punch through that space."

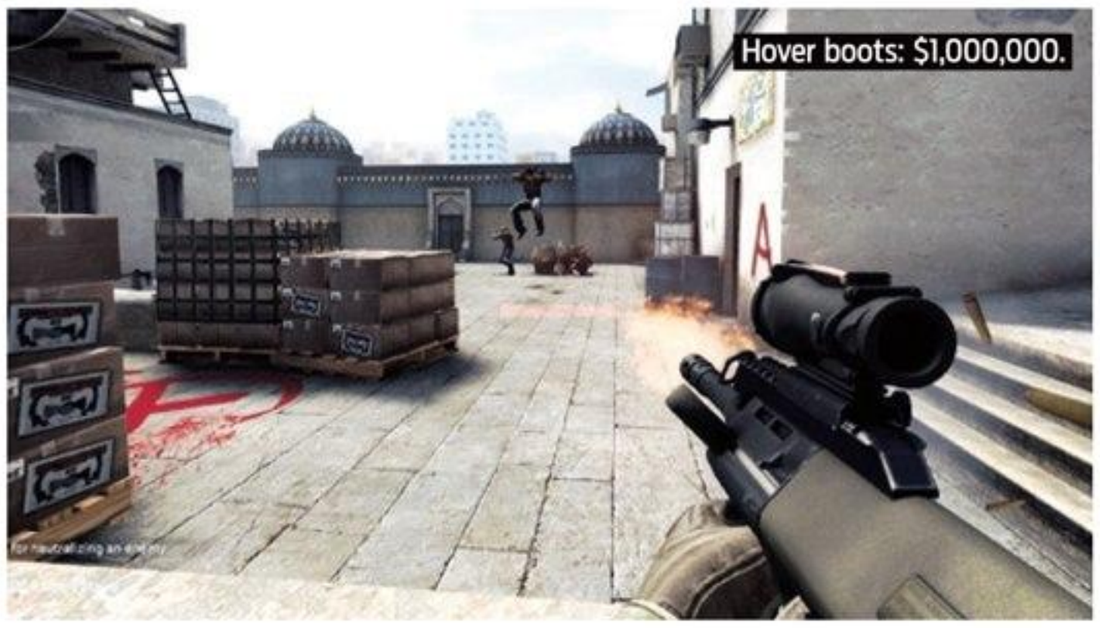
Global Offensive's vision of Dust aims to fix that. As Magal listed the changes (see the end of this article), my countless hours of *Counter-Strike* experience kicked in. I nodded through every alteration, running the potential firefights in my head. My experience was making me excited all over again about a game I've been playing for 13 years.

Global Offensive's blessing is its familiarity. But that's also its curse. *CS: GO* marks the third attempt to define the game. The first was by a team of modders, the second by Valve itself. This time it's a collaboration, between Valve and Hidden Path Entertainment, makers of *Defense Grid: The Awakening*.

For much of those 13 years, the game has remained in stasis, telling the same five-minute stories of Terrorists and Counter-Terrorists planting bombs, escorting hostages, and shooting each other in the face.

Until now, that worked. It enabled the game to pervade the niche mod-culture that spawned it, and to define online gaming as we know it. It allowed a nascent professional gaming scene to coalesce around it. It has meant that for most of Steam's lifespan, the two versions of *Counter-Strike—Source* and *1.6*—have hogged the first





and second spots on the service's "most current players" list.

So why now for a new *Counter-Strike*? Valve's Chet Faliszek sees it as a logical decision. "The *Counter Strike* communities—both *CS: S* and *1.6*—are really strong. [But] if you want to get somebody excited about *CS:S* or *1.6* right now, it's pretty hard to get past the barrier of how the games look. Player numbers are starting to go down a bit. I think we're past the apex for both. We want to take what makes them special and fun and update them and grow the *Counter-Strike* community again."

Pressure, Valve

Extrapolate the demonstrably huge group of players to the next level and *CS: GO* becomes a truly exciting, industry-affecting title. Players weaned on the *1.6* and *Source* versions of Dust and Aztec and Office stand ready to replay their proudest victories and crushing defeats all over again. Faliszek acknowledges the burden: "There's this really strong community that has this sense of ownership of the game. You want to make sure that you work with them, that they feel the same about this new game, that we're just not thrusting it down upon them."

This collaborative work has started to loosen the inertia that has held *Counter-Strike* in place. Ido explains how his team are refitting some of gaming's most iconic environments. "Some maps were abandoned by the scene because they were too lopsided. We picked those up and decided to make bigger changes to them. Like Dust, which was extraordinarily popular back in the day, but today it's hardly played in *CS: Source*."

How did Valve make these fixes?

"It was context. We just had a lot of data that Dust wasn't being played any more, because we have that much data recording in Source."

Global Offensive marks the start of a more comprehensive data-mining exercise, enabling Valve to work out whether its changes are competitively viable. "We record every bullet fired in *CS: GO*. As *GO* ramps up and we get data then we'll be able to respond. One of our new paths might be broken, or there might be something else about Dust that needs fixing."

The data pulled from the earlier *Counter-Strikes* has colored *GO* in other ways. "When we started we sorted *Counter-Strike*

"I once joked you could put 10 dollars in a bag and give it away for free, and someone's going to complain you didn't put in 20."

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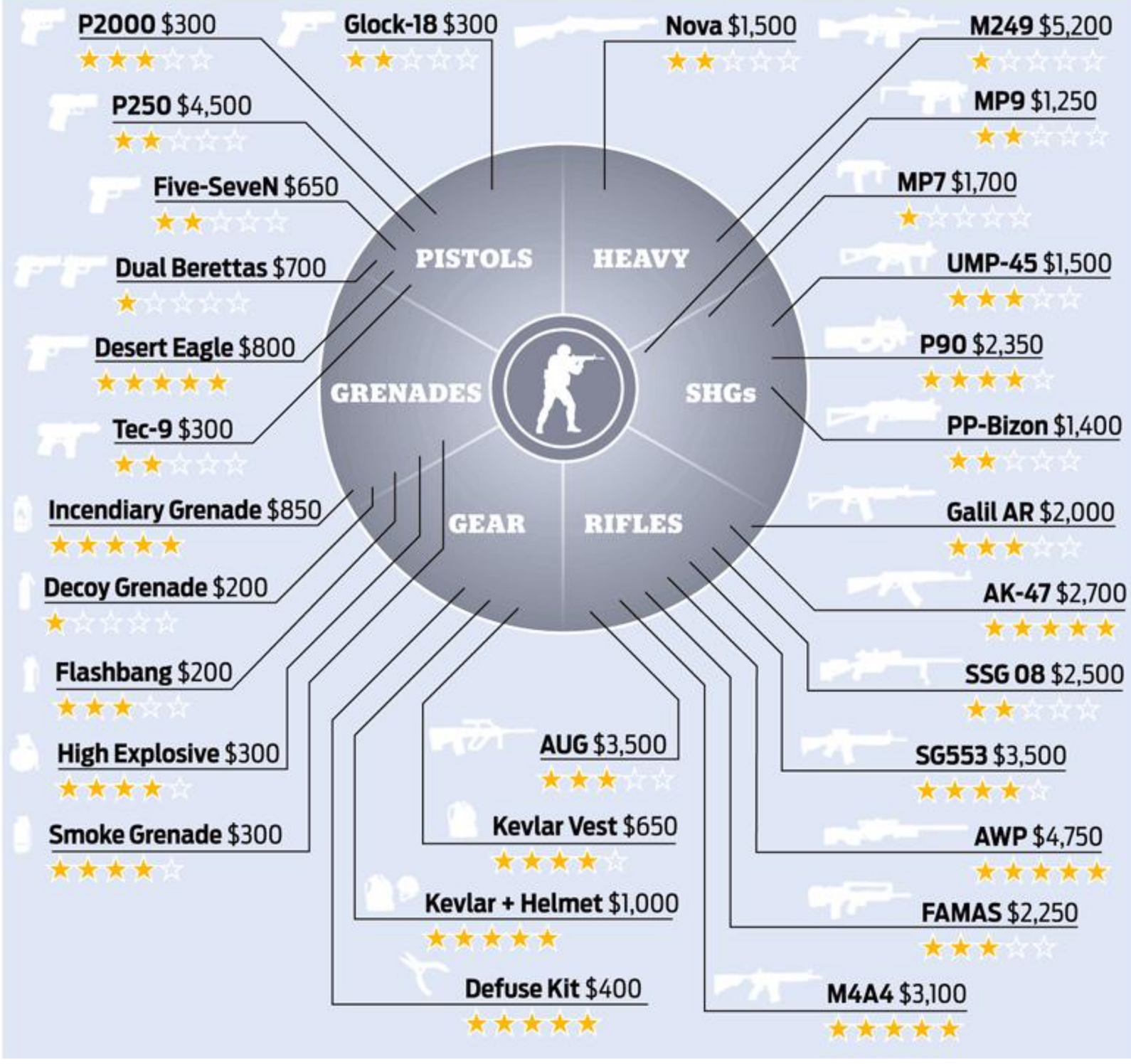
GO! GO! GO!

GUNS. LOTS OF GUNS. *CS:GO*'s arsenal exposed



maps by playtime, and we picked off the top of that list. We're pretty confident that's what most of the community will want." The current lineup includes Dust 1 and 2, Train and Inferno, as well as a version of Aztec with "huge revisions." My plaintive request for an updated version of *CS 1.6*'s oddball map as_oilrig was met with diplomacy by Magal: "once we get to the ninth or tenth most-played map, we can start to make some decisions about maybe picking a lesser played map that could be interesting."

In addition to updating the existing map pool, Valve are adding new arenas. Magal maintains that they won't be messing with the existing rotation. "we made the conscious decision not to start designing new highly strategic maps for the classic mode." Instead, the studio unleashed their geographical creativity on maps for *GO*'s "demolition" mode—a hybrid of the standard bomb defusal mode and the ever-popular "gungame" mod-modifier, where players have to earn kills with specific weapons to unlock the next one along.

"These maps are meant to be intense, quick and a bit lighter in terms of the required coordination on the team. They alleviate some of the friction from getting into *Counter-Strike* as a new player. You don't have to pick your weapon—that choice is made for you, and as soon as you spawn, you see your destination."

I've spent a lot of time on the first of these new maps, de_lake. This is a defusal map where both parties start exuberant-spitting distance from each other. They're separated by a house that serves both as buffer and congealing point for conflict, but clever players can make their way around the outside of the map, using rocks, skips and building materials as cover to hit the opposing team in their unprotected rump. The house makes battle lines quickly fluid. If the firefight has not been won after the first few salvos, players tend to circle the central house in a holding pattern, like particularly aggressive human aeroplanes.

Lake lacks the complex sight lines and constant tactical recalculations of *Counter-Strike*'s established arenas, providing instead consistently bloody, quick games. Lake's demolition ruleset means one skilled player has a tough time dominating the competition: the traditional gungame rules award better weapons with each kill, but as Magal explains, Valve flipped that idea on its head, borrowing the "reverse gungame" template that's popular on some *CS* servers. "We started with a positive feedback loop in the weapons. That actually provided the better players a bad experience, because the game just kept getting easier for them. The weaker players just got frustrated. Then we tried reversing it, for a negative feedback loop. That was a huge success: eventually the differential in the weapons made up for the difference in the skills. Now it's more of a valley. After you've killed with the pistols, we have the Scout (sniper rifle) as a skill wall. Get a kill with that, and there's some better weapons past that. It works: a good player gets down to a pistol and a weaker player has a good chance of killing them."

GO! GO! GO!

Valve is committed to making *CS: GO* a tempting prospect for those weaker players. Magal codifies it for me: "accessibility, ability to find people to play with easily, visual appeal: these are the most significant issues that we're trying to fix."

Both he and Faliszek, when asked what they see as the biggest innovation between old and new *Counter-Strike*s, point to *GO*'s matchmaking systems.

"With *CS:GO*, the very first thing we wanted to do was have skill-based matchmaking. And that isn't just about the matchmaking itself, but what it allows us to do: we can separate. If you're playing in casual mode, you're not having Elo-based matchmaking. You're relaxed. If you're a ranked match player, you'll be playing people of equal skill."

But this accessibility comes at a price. "I once joked you could put ten dollars in a bag and give it away for free, and someone's going to complain you didn't put twenty in the bag." Faliszek sighs slightly before condemning humanity. "That's just the nature of people."

Faliszek is talking about player feedback. Not even out of closed beta, *GO* has already attracted criticism, led by the people you'd expect would love *CS* best: pro players. *Counter-Strike 1.6* pro-gamer Tomi "lurppis" Kovanen has dubbed it "terrible." Alex Garfield—owner of eSports team Evil Geniuses—explained to *PC Gamer* how Valve should spike *GO* development completely and refocus their efforts.

Holy hand grenades

In gaming terms, *Counter-Strike* is the competitive shooting bible. Changing it now is tantamount to blasphemy; the punishment, a public flogging provided by vocal and savvy members of the community.

Most controversially of all, Valve has made clear its plans to release *GO* on consoles—a first for *CS*.

You can bet Faliszek's aware of the complaints—but they're not weighing him down. "We make the best game we can. We put everything we can into it and we go from there. There's always going to be backlash. You can't get caught up in that."

"We make the best game we can. We put everything we can into it and we go from there. There's always going to be backlash."

In their ironsights are *GO*'s ballistic physics. *Counter-Strike*'s AK-47 and M4A4 are the series' most iconic weapons, and return in *Global Offensive*. In its current form the AK feels flat compared to its bucking 1.6 incarnation. That impression is aided by the typerwriter-like muzzle noise, more cough than bark. Pro gamer Patrik "cArn" Sättermon (go say hello on page 12) explained to me how *CS*' guns should respond: "the recoil should be worked out with several techniques such as tapping, single shooting and spraying. Single shots are at this point too imbalanced."

He sighs again slightly as we run over the feedback Valve has received so far. "It's hard trying to communicate to the *1.6* and *CS:S* players and get them to see where it's going." But his team's solution is in place: openness.

"That's why we have this long beta. People can see what's going on, give us feedback and we'll keep working on it. It's probably unfair to call what's out a beta—it's still an alpha. It's not feature complete, and I think it's been interesting that the community has been trying to work through what that means and their expectations. Normally you get something from Valve and it's highly polished, there's

EVOLVING A CLASSIC Ido Magal explains how *CS: GO* has changed de_dust

Underpass

"We also added a little plank bridge that would help the terrorists get to the new bomb-site position if they took the second new route."

Spawn zone

"We moved the terrorist spawn point to be closer to the other route so they have the choice when they spawn. Now the terrorists spawn higher up, closer to the second route."

Bridge

"The second route has more cover in it, and it has a stairwell leading up to the overpass. Before, you'd either take the short route or the really long route where you get sniped in the feet."

Bomb site

"Also we moved a bomb site that was up where CT spawned. That was a Hail Mary for the Ts. We moved that down closer toward the center."

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this really strong starting base. Here we're saying, 'the base is still being worked on.'"

It's a marked departure for a studio known for shipping games so polished they gleam. Faliszek's aware of the difference, and notes what is perhaps a significant shift within the company. "We gave a talk recently about *Portal 2*'s development: a few months before it shipped, we didn't know if it was a good game or not. And so we find ourselves now developing a little differently: we have to do some stuff more visibly than we normally would, because internally we have this faith that it's all going to pull together at the end."

Faliszek sees *CS: GO* as the first time Valve has asked for feedback this early in a project, describing their approach as "getting way out in front of it." Despite the negative comments, he's adamant the response is helping. "You get them involved because if you get a million people looking at something, somebody is going to be insanely smart about some factor of it." Magal, too, acknowledges the community's experience: "We don't pretend to have played it as much or as in depth as they have, so we value their input."

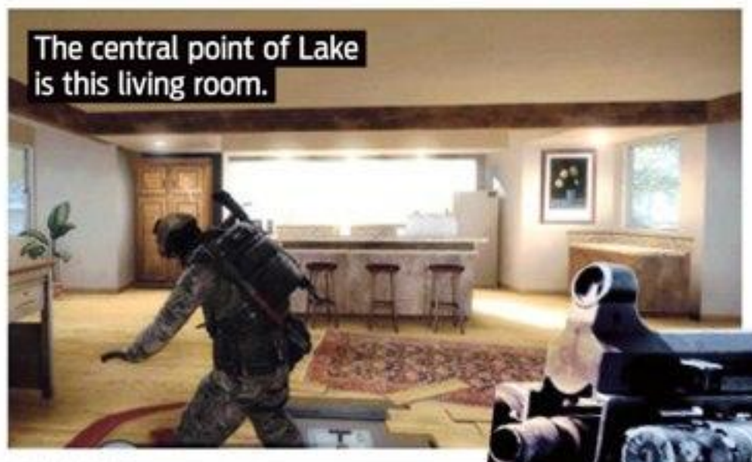
Both Faliszek and Magal are up to date with the community's valid gripes. The day before my interview was scheduled, *PC Gamer*'s Evan Lahti spoke to eloquent ex-pro player turned commentator Jimmy Whisenhunt about a video in which he compares screen movement between *CS 1.6* and *CS: GO*. Whisenhunt argued the new game doesn't provide enough firing feedback. Faliszek drops his name: "There's some really good videos—like Recoil by Whisenhunt—where he brings up some points about feel. That's something we hadn't narrowed down on as much between *1.6*, because we were looking at the practical numbers comparison. That's the kind of thing we're not in the position to test yet—it's something we'll try internally."

Counter-Strike is one of the world's few games to benefit from a professional-standard cadre of players. Faliszek mentions Sal "'Volcano" Garozzo as a pro-gamer he's in constant contact with. But the community is already split between *1.6* and *CS: Source*. "You can't just say there's one answer for all the pros. There's such a variety of opinion and feedback. There's a meta thing they want: for there to continue to be a *CS* game that's played at a competitive level that they can make a living from. It's harder and harder for some sponsors to sponsor *1.6*. It doesn't show as well, it doesn't look as good, and that impacts sponsors. I've talked to a few at the New York Intel Extreme Masters tournament where it was really clear they were saying: 'hey, you're playing with a loaded gun here. While we want it to succeed because it will be better for us, if you screw it up it's gonna hurt us. So don't screw it up.' And that's fair."

I asked Chet if *GO* has a dedicated eSports specialist working on how to slot the title into the competitive cycle. "We don't have a department that worries and works on that. Our big concern is making the best game. We don't want to prop up a game that doesn't deserve to fit into that world by just investing money or running a bunch of stuff." He believes in leaving that in the hands of people who understand their sport like no other. "They know their communities better than we know their communities. There's more value in their communities being stronger than in us saying 'no, come to us.'"

But *Counter-Strike* doesn't just belong to the elite core of pro players. Faliszek and Magal both focus on accessibility in our interview, conscious of a gigantic player base that encompasses all skill levels, game modes, and player types. Chet says "as we make *CS:GO* we have to make sure we're not making it for one part of that community—we're making it for the entire community."

For another FPS, that aim might be too lofty. *GO* is targeted at casual, nostalgic, console, and hardcore players. That leaves a lot of gaps down which to disappear. But 25 million people have played it. That nation's-worth of people gives Valve enough data—now it's up to the developer to make a game good enough to satisfy them all. ■



It's a minor miracle that they've preserved so much of what made *Tribes* special.

Need to know

What is it?
A fluid, free-to-play sci-fi multiplayer FPS.

Influenced by
Tribes 2

Play it on
2.4GHz quad-core processor, 4GB RAM, GeForce 580/ Radeon AMD 5870

Alternatively
Team Fortress 2

Copy protection
Online login

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FLYING HIGH

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Revamped for a new generation of PCs, **TRIBES: ASCEND** is free, fast, and faithful to itself *by Evan Lahti*

Wonderful, breath-clutching games of chicken happen along the z-axis in *Tribes: Ascend*.

You're hovering, the guy you want to kill is hovering, and you each have a few sips of battery juice left in your jetpack. Gravity is death: drop first, and you become an instant candidate for one of *Tribes*' splash-damage weapons: a grenade, Spinfusor disc, or gamma-ray-green mortar shell.

In these shared seconds of airtime, your brain crunches weapon trajectory paths, shot velocity, topography and damage radii—and there's a layer of deception happening atop that. Maybe I'll feint a fall, then right-click to lift at the last second. Maybe he'll whip out his secondary weapon to harass me out of the air with pistol shots. Maybe I'll put a grenade under him to force him to spend all his flight energy.

This is a lot of good nuance. Plenty of FPS games demand finesse, but *Tribes: Ascend* is one of the few I've played that supports this mental-physical ballet (*Quake III* is another). In open beta since February, it still isn't without issues. Teamwork is suspiciously inconsistent, VOIP and dedicated server support are probably coming at launch on April 12, some weapons have a high learning curve, vehicles don't influence matches as much as I wish they did.

But mostly, it's a minor miracle that a young, independent studio has preserved so much of what made *Tribes* (*Tribes 2*, moreso) special, while turning it into an affordable microtransaction-supported game in a new engine.

If high speed movement is your only point of reference for *Tribes*, know that it's as easy as it has ever been. Skiing is simple: hit the spacebar when you're facing down a hill, and you'll slide frictionlessly. It's like having bowling balls for feet. You maintain any momentum until you reach an upward slope, then right-click to jetpack up another hill.

That seesaw repetition between your thumb and the right mouse button is simple work. The hard and satisfying part comes in orienting yourself in the air to a trajectory that lets you land gently and without losing any momentum. Hi-Rez's smart addition of a speedometer to *Tribes* provides welcome feedback. If I flub a landing, I can see the dent it makes in my velocity immediately.

Après ski

For learning the basics, however, I wish *Ascend*'s skiing tutorial was built in a way that provided real moment-to-moment feedback. The lone walkthrough talks you through it, but there's no dynamic, evaluative system in place to tell you if you should've jetpacked a half-second earlier or landed a bit more to the left of where you did. Right now, your best tutor is probably YouTube (*bit.ly/AjAhkD*) or loading a local server to drill by yourself.

Overall, it's a damn pleasure to play an FPS that reveres movement again. The entry point for skiing is relatively low for anyone who plays shooters, but the skill ceiling is appropriately high. Masters of fast-movement throw explosives at their own feet to achieve maximum momentum. Expert flag-runners figure out clever routes. It all lends *Tribes* an aspirational quality I love: when you see someone moving fluidly, you want to get better.

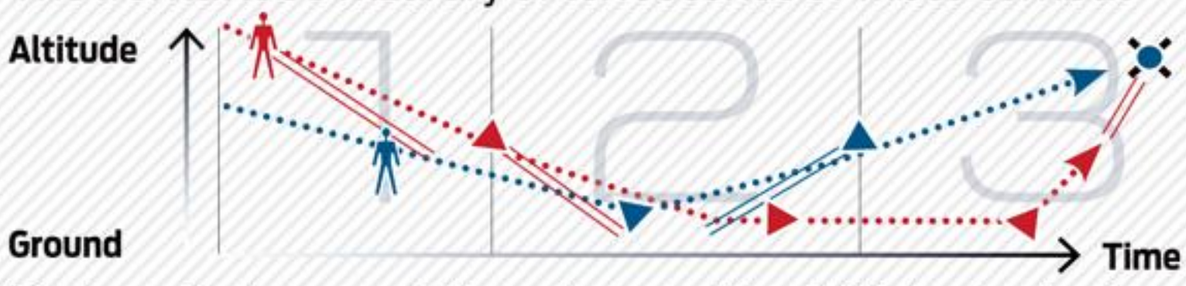
But movement isn't the only fun thing to do on *Tribes*' busty topography, thank goodness. *Ascend* is the first time *Tribes* has had classes, and I don't think their addition hampers the joy of finding a job on the battlefield and making it yours.

Sometimes I dedicate an entire round just to bringing down the enemy's generator (there's a stat in your profile that measures generators killed per hour, even), which powers their turrets, inventory stations and sensors. Even if I die, I'm happy knowing I'm holding the attention of three or four enemies in the process.

Sometimes I focus on taking speed away from enemies in the midfield—filling skiing lines with chaingun munition and throwing flag-runners off their stride. A more direct—and entirely viable—job is playing a Juggernaut with the Super Heavy perk, standing right on the flag to block banner thieves. It's wonderful

Mental math

The frontal lobe wizardry of ten seconds of *Tribes* combat



1. Spot enemy 50 meters away, low health. He doesn't see me. Fire a Spinfusor a few meters ahead of him.
Brain activity: scanning, timing, leading.

2. He reaccelerates up a hill, gets airborne, and turns to fire at me.
Brain activity: scan landscape for highest/lowest points, escape routes.

3. He's down to a sliver of health. My Eagle pistol touches him twice in 12 shots, and he drops like an armored fly.
Brain activity: concentration, hand-eye coordination.

that players who don't want to be athletic still have a dozen ways to be heroes. And that I can migrate between these positions depending on map and mood.

With role variety as a strength, though, it's puzzling that *Tribes*' incentives for teamwork are so thin. Kill assists and flag passing are the only game mechanics in place that directly encourage players to work together. It's frustrating when a public match occasionally devolves into a bunch of individuals doing their own thing.

That wouldn't be so damning if voice communication wasn't still waiting to be patched in. The voice hotkey system is handy (tap 'VDG' to broadcast "Defend our generator!"), but provides no room for real strategic planning. This is a serious teamwork sapper.

This is less apparent in team deathmatch, which operates really well as a break from the labor of base-guarding. It's more mindless than CTF: a swirling hive of players spend lives from a shared pool of a hundred per team, chasing a single flag (owning it makes your team's kills worth double). I like the circular shape of these maps—a NASCAR-like train of players tends to form behind the flag carrier, jousting and trading fire. It's a great sight.

Cost of living

Tribes' free-to-play model is pretty fair, as those things go. Pricing is tiered: spending more gets you proportionately more in-game currency. For $50, you get 5,500 gold, or 110 gold/dollar. For $20, you get 1,800 gold, or 90 gold/dollar. $30 (3,000 gold) is enough to try every class and specialize in two or three. The six paid classes (everyone gets the Pathfinder, Soldier, and Juggernaut free) cost between 160 and 280 gold each. All six is 1,360 gold, or about $13.

That's reasonable—the barrier to finding your favorite class is low. Owning more classes opens more gateways to player purchasing of weapons, perks, skins and equipment, most of which cost more. The most expensive weapons are about $8, and that does include attractive guns such as the MIRV (a cluster-mortar that fires a shell that splits in mid-air) and the Thumper grenade launcher.

Paid ("VIP") players are awarded bonus XP after each match, but skill still absolutely overrides those boons. At the time of writing, all weapons and perks can also be purchased with that freely earned XP. Most importantly, the payment model doesn't replace the need to master *Tribes*' weapons and movement. You still have to aim where enemies will be, not where they are.

The great feedback the guns give facilitates this. Nearly all project their firing path and velocity, either with a tracer or a colored comet tail. Admiring a shot in the air that you know will connect with an enemy's face is one of *Tribes*' unique joys.

My gripes don't end with the sparse teamwork, however. Base interiors are simplistic. The five-on-five arena mode (tight, tiny ledges floating in the sky) bores and frustrates me compared to CTF because the maps are rigid in a way that makes skiing impossible. I also don't like how ancillary vehicles are to victory; they're an expensive way of attracting attention to yourself and getting killed. The most useful—an air fighter called the Shrike – is just a pricey mosquito in the hands of anyone other than a pro pilot.

Little of this, however, gets in the way of the primal, potent feelings of chasing and being chased.

There's a thing that happens often in the middle of most maps: you pass a foe at high speed en route to each other's base. Usually you're going too fast to even bother attacking—you both silently tip your hats and hope the other guy gets killed by your team. One time I blazed past a guy in the center like this. My brain took over, reflexively telling my hand to left-click. I flicked a Spinfusor disc over my shoulder. Through no will of my own, it connected. He died, and I slid on unmolested, yelling only the word "WHAT" over and over at my monitor. This Venn overlap of intuition and speed is where *Tribes*' magic takes place, and it produces an insane hole-in-one shot for you every match or two. ■

Role call

A breakdown of every *Tribes* class

LIGHT

Pathfinder
Best weapons: Bolt Launcher, Shotgun
Good for: flag grabbing, fast pursuit
Difficulty: 4/10
Comparable to: *TF2*'s Scout

Pathfinder

Sentinel
Best weapons: BXT1 Rifle, Claymores
Good for: harassment, stopping flag carriers
Difficulty: 5/10
Comparable to: AWP junkies in *Counter-Strike*

Infiltrator
Best weapons: Stealth Spinfusor, Stealth Pack
Good for: base infiltration, killing Sentinels
Difficulty: 7/10
Comparable to: the Predator

MEDIUM

Soldier
Best weapons: Spinfusor, Thumper DX
Good for: versatility, pursuit
Difficulty: 3/10
Comparable to: Rambo

Technician
Best weapons: TCN4 SMG, light turret
Good for: base defense, turret and generator repair
Difficulty: 7/10
Comparable to: *TF2*'s Engineer

Raider
Best weapons: Arx Buster, Shield Pack
Good for: structure and vehicle assassination
Difficulty: 4/10
Comparable to: *TF2*'s Demoman

Raider

HEAVY

Juggernaut
Best weapons: Fusion Mortar, Spinfusor MKD
Good for: base defense, area-denial artillery
Difficulty: 8/10
Comparable to: *Quake III*'s grenade launcher

Doombringer
Best weapons: Chaingun, Force Field
Good for: on-flag defense, flag blocking
Difficulty: 6/10
Comparable to: A bouncer

Brute
Best weapons: Heavy Spinfusor, Fractal Grenade
Good for: base assault
Difficulty: 5/10
Comparable to: a Krogan warrior

Brute

◆ **Price** Free ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Hi-Rez Studios ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 32 player ◆ **Link** bit.ly/vkXShF ◆ **ESRB** TK

VERDICT

A brilliant resurrection of a classic. Speed and skill-driven mechanics separate Tribes from other modern shooters.

PC GAMER **88**

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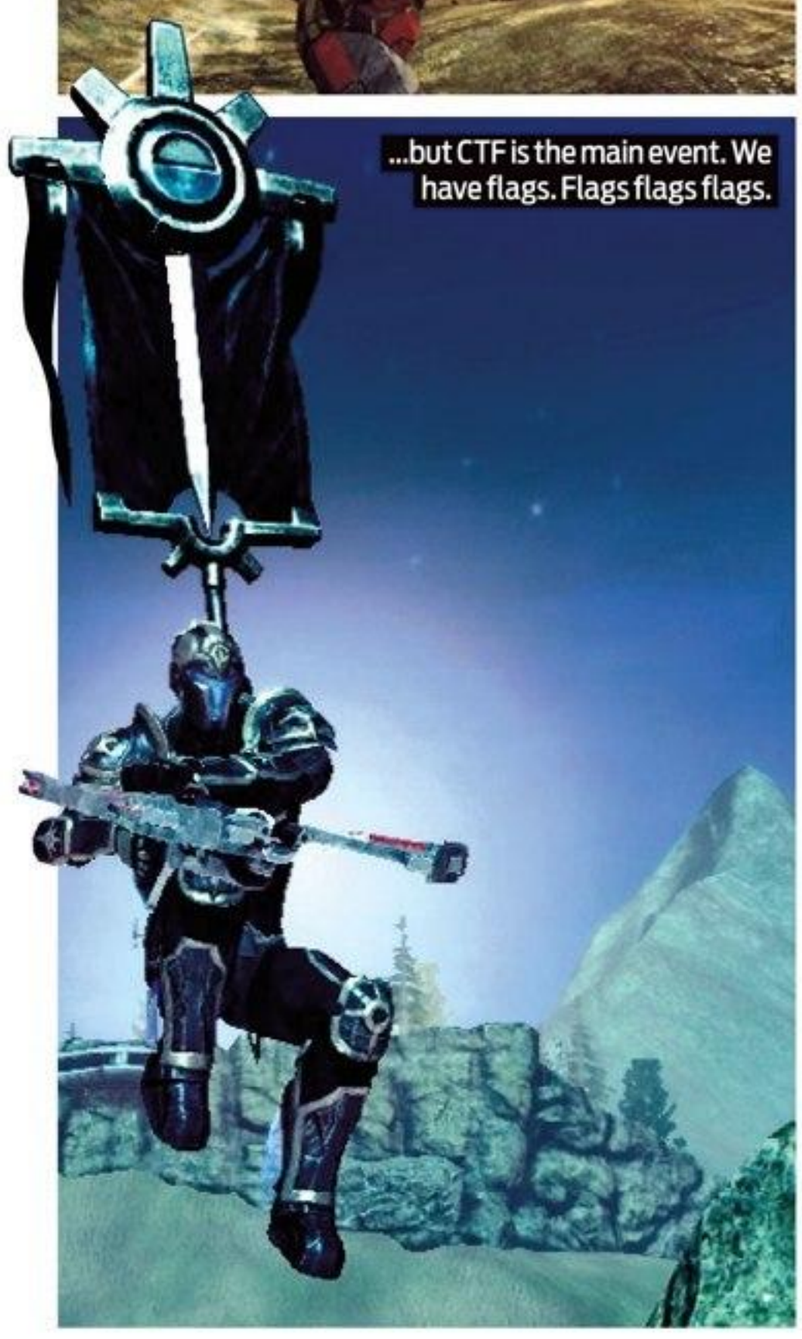
Taking the flag for a walk is a popular first date.

There are few traditional firearms.

Tribes' skyboxes are the best I've ever seen.

It's damn hard to hit anything with this shotgun.

Team Deathmatch is a change of pace...


...but CTF is the main event. We have flags. Flags flags flags.

Mortars aren't ideal against airborne targets.

Another ski trip ends in tragedy.

To get a successful capture, stay on your toes.

DISTINCT DEPARTURE

You get a free boarding pass with **MICROSOFT FLIGHT** but expect to pay for the gas ***by Andy Mahood***

Need to know

What is it?
A light flight simulation game

Influenced by
Flight Simulator X (the gamey part)

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB DX-10 Videocard

Alternatively
Flight Simulator X; X-Plane 10

Copy protection
Online registration

The South Pacific sunset casts streaks of dappled light on the Icon A5's sportscar-like instrument panel as I check the light aircraft's airspeed and sink rate. A couple of subtle attitude and throttle corrections with the mouse (yes, the mouse) and the red-on-white lights near the threshold of Kona's runway 35 smile back to let me know I'm lined up for what should be a soft three-point landing. This flying stuff is pretty flipping easy once you put your mind to it.

That's Microsoft's new take on its long-running *Flight Simulator* brand. Forget those complex navigation instruments and intrusive FAA flight procedures of chapters past. No IFR (instrument flight rules) flights, no long-haul passenger jet routes, and no issues for gamers sans joysticks. *Microsoft Flight* takes you on a sightseeing and joyriding adventure without the need for dedicated peripherals or even a clear idea what you're doing up there.

The initial hook is a free-to-play download that sets you up with a couple of planes (the aforementioned Icon A5 "flying Jet Ski" and a classic Boeing Stearman biplane) and the largest island on the Hawaiian archipelago to fly around in. Fleshing out this content is a series of flight challenges, missions, and treasure hunt-style aerocache hunts intended to fuel *Flight's* gaming component.

For sale: Hawaii

These diversions entertain for a while but they turn stale just as fast. The challenges and missions are mostly short passenger hops, varied landing scenarios, or flying-through-hoops exercises intended to sharpen your flying skills but they become so repetitive after a few hours you'll be screaming for something new.

That's where Microsoft's DLC business model comes in. Bored fliers can purchase a Hawaiian Adventure pack—which includes all eight islands and a Vans RV-6A two-seater—as downloadable content for $20 while a Maule M-7-260C and a (cockpit-less) P-51 Mustang will set you back $15 and $8 respectively. Those who go all-in here can more than double the size of their hangars and flying environment (albeit only to about 0.00003 percent the size of *Flight Simulator X's* entire planet).

But even after unlocking over forty bucks worth of extras, *Flight* fails to deliver a compelling gaming experience. Hardcore simmers will decry the absence of functioning radios, instrument flight options, and aircraft/scenery variety while casual gamers will baulk at the repetitive, uninspired missions and the complete absence of AI traffic.

Atari populated the island of Oahu with moving vehicles in *Test Drive Unlimited*—Microsoft should have attempted something similar here. If not cars then at least a few other planes vying for landing priority (you won't even find *parked* aircraft at major airports). Of course, that would require implementing radios and Air Traffic Control. For now, the only life you'll witness in this sterile environment is through *Flight's* GfWL multiplayer component, where you and up to fifteen players can fly around and waggle wings at one other (but little else).

Although technically turbulence-free—the individual flight modeling is top notch, aircraft exteriors and instrument panels look fantastic, and the game's lush, detailed island scenery flows by like butter, even on older mid-range systems—*Microsoft Flight* ultimately flies into a void that few simmers or gamers are likely to want to visit. ■

Treasure hunt

Microsoft Flight's featured Icon A5 amphibious commuter plane can get you anywhere you need to go.

It's a bird, it's a boat
Land anywhere you want thanks to the plane's unique amphibious design.

Beachcomber
Drop the landing gear while you're in the water andthen crawl up on to any beach you want.

Checkout time
Gun the throttle, retract the gear, and you're ready to leap back into the air at a moment's notice.

I want one!
It isn't even on the market yet but, if you have a spare $140,000 you can pre-order an A5.

◆ **Price** The core game is free. $20 for Hawaii Adventure Pack DLC. $15 and $8 respectively for Maule M-7-260C and P-51 Mustang aircraft. ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Microsoft ◆ **Developer** Microsoft Game Studios ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 16 on Games for Windows Live ◆ **Link** www.microsoft.com/games/flight ◆ **ESRB** E

VERDICT

Technically impressive but entertainment-deficient game that strays off course for sim fans and casual gamers alike.

PC GAMER 82

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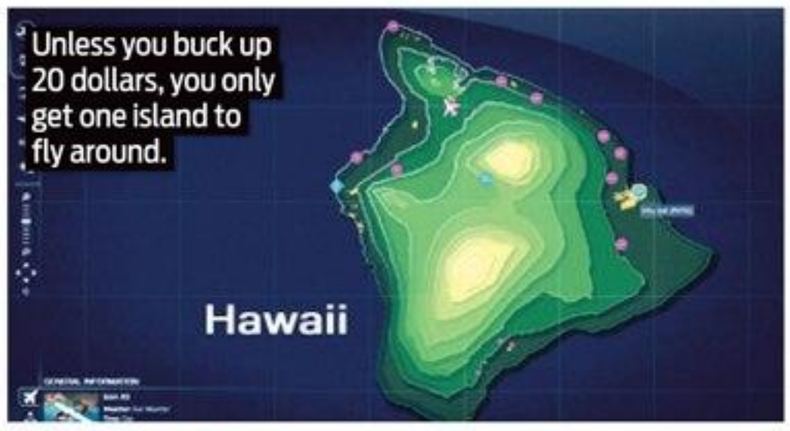
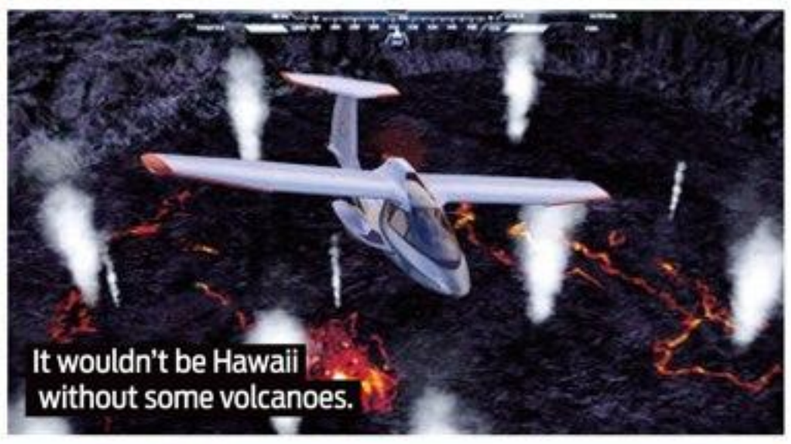
Flying in paradise should be more interesting than this.

The aircraft detailing and scenery detail is first rate.



Unless you buck up 20 dollars, you only get one island to fly around.

The radios may not work but they look pretty.


It wouldn't be Hawaii without some volcanoes.

Aerocache challenges entail finding and flying through specific location icons.

This game will make you fly through hoops (literally).

Ladies and gentlemen, The Zebra Baron.

NEW VIC

Use violence to change the colors of maps in **VICTORIA II: A HOUSE DIVIDED** *by Tim Stone*

Need to know

What is it?
A good add-on for a good depiction of 19th century nation and empire building.

Influenced by
Fan feedback

Play it on
Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, 512MB 3D card

Alternatively
Crusader Kings 2, 87%

Copy protection
Gamersgate

Victoria II was one of my biggest disappointments of 2010. I impulse-bought it assuming there'd be lots of spaniel-cuddling and WASDing a grumpy crinoline-clad VR around 3D reconstructions of Balmoral and Osborne House. Imagine my dismay when I discovered it was a seriously detailed, seriously dry simulation of colonial-era geopolitics.

This expansion doesn't add the strokable lapdogs, gilded palaces or corset tightness slider the game badly needs, but it does nip, tuck and augment in other pleasing ways.

For starters, there's a new grand campaign portal. A team of Paradox's research urchins has spent the last year figuring out what 200+ of the world's countries produced, controlled, believed and thought of each other, circa 1861.

This extra entry point permits participation in the disintegration of Europe. Relatively crude battle mechanics mean you won't end up with a civil war as interesting or credible as the one offered by Ageod's *American Civil War*, but to be fair, that gem didn't give you the opportunity to end games in 1936 with a victorious Confederacy lording it over Canada, Mexico and significant parts of South America.

Hearts and minds

Violent land-grabbing is harder in *AHD* than vanilla *Victoria II*. Tweaked economics make funding large militaries trickier, and a new war justification system means you can't swan across borders at the drop of a Pickelhaube. I'm not entirely convinced about the latter. Where previously, aspiring Kaiser Bills were slowed by infamy penalties and cost concerns, now they've also got to press a "justify war" button and wait a few months with fingers crossed, before violating the territory of even the most minuscule state.

Less double-edged are the host of interface improvements and the changes to the way internal discontent is represented. Instead of tearing-up cobblestones and overturning police carriages, angry citizens may now decide to vent their frustration peacefully by joining political activism groups. Should these parliament-impacting pressure groups lose patience and take up arms, an automatic rebel-hunting option cuts down on the all-or-nothing hopscotch that masquerades as war in *Victoria II*.

Serious martial reforms must surely be on the cards for the next expansion, and I hope any future add-on will also add a little more color to colonialism. For a game set during the golden era of European power projection, *AHD* really doesn't make much effort to simulate its subtleties. While last year's *Pride of Nations* shot itself in the foot with interminable turn processing, it handled the scramble for Africa and Asia with far more imagination.

An *AHD*ed *Victoria II* can be a mesmerizing thing, but a chilly one. I put it down to all the stats and the shameful lack of spaniel petting. ■

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paradox ◆ **Developer** Paradox
◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players ◆ **Link** www.victoria2.com

VERDICT

Brings numerous improvements to the original *Victoria II*, but this rotund royal will still be too dour for most.

PC GAMER 73

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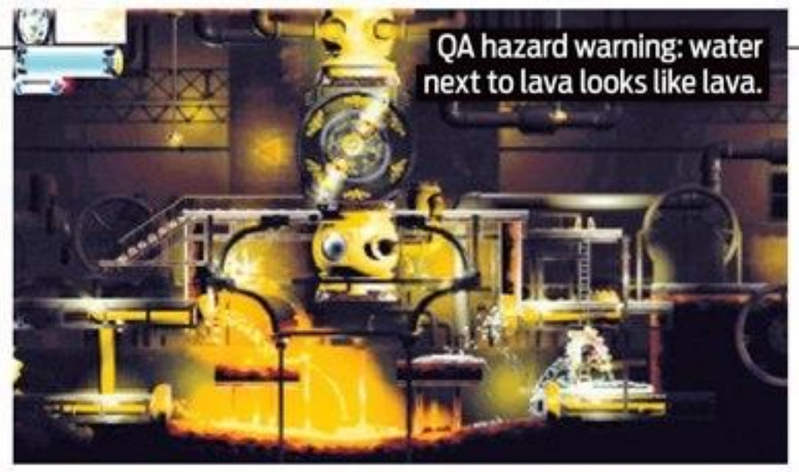
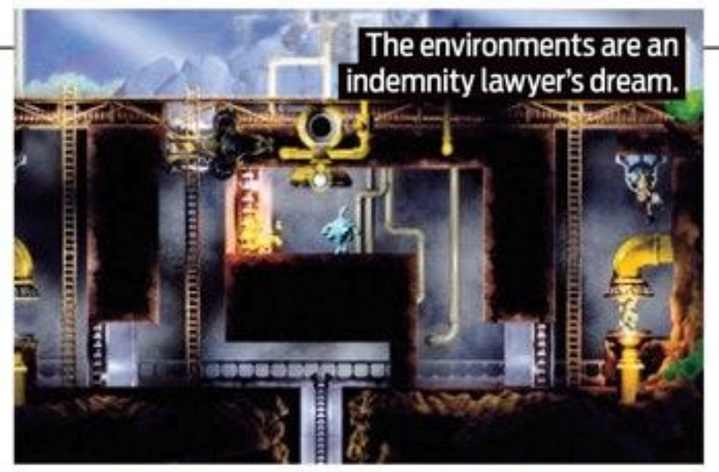
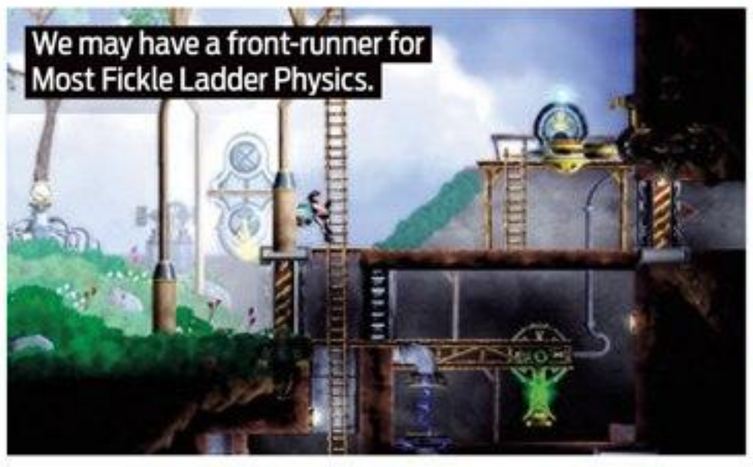
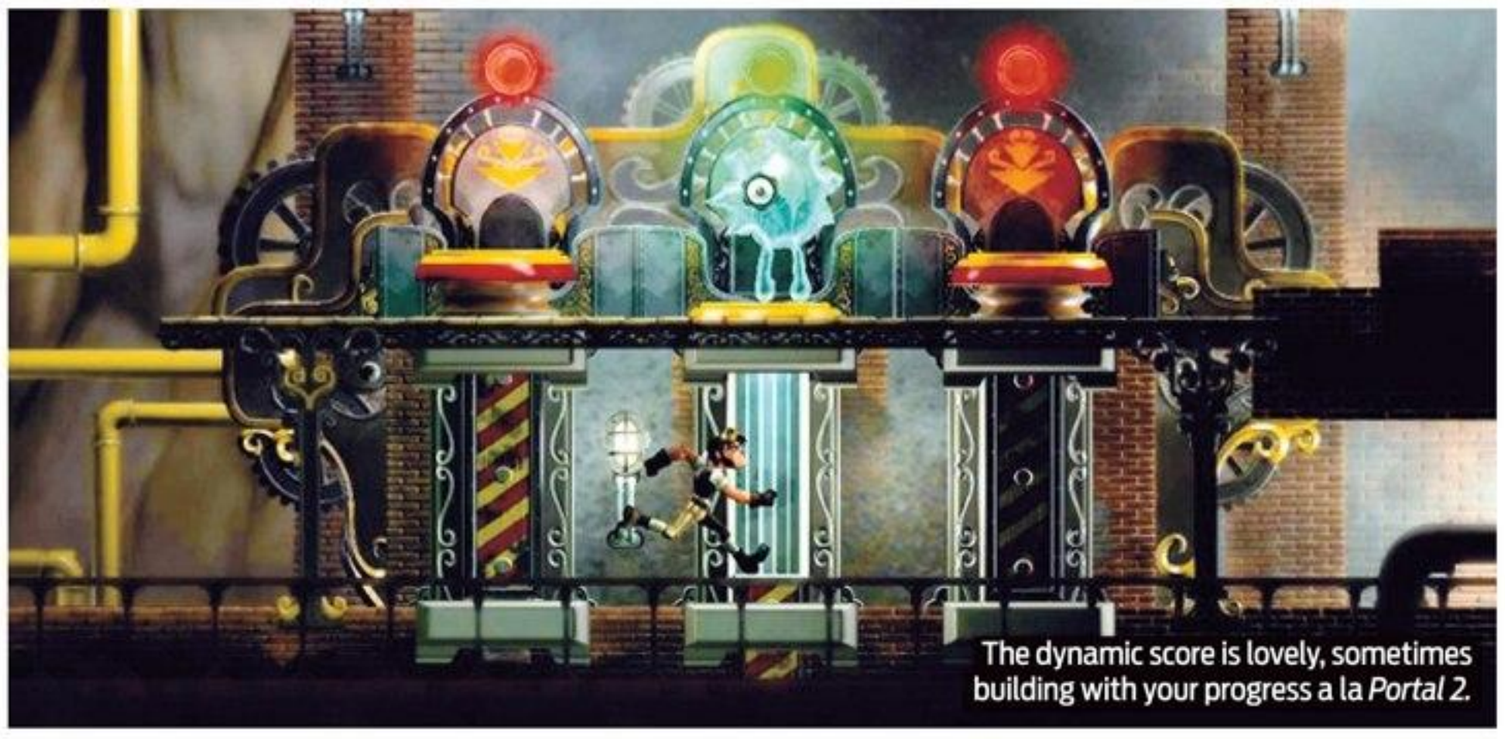
Does anyone know a plumber?


QA hazard warning: water next to lava looks like lava.


The environments are an indemnity lawyer's dream.


We may have a front-runner for Most Fickle Ladder Physics.


The dynamic score is lovely, sometimes building with your progress a la *Portal 2*.

TRICKLE TREAT

Is puzzle-platformer **VESSEL**'s fluid simulation a liquid asset? *by Marsh Davies*

In *Vessel*'s alternate universe of gushing smokestacks and spinning cogwheels, industry has been supported by a single inventor—you—and your world-changing creation: the fluro. These semi-sentient servile beings coalesce from available liquids, and have an often self-destructive desire to jump on large red buttons.

A laboratory mishap reveals their many and varied adaptations, which turn out to be handy for solving the throw-switch and pressure-plate puzzles of this 2D platform world.

A supply of fluro "seeds" lets you conjure these critters wherever you choose. Drop one, douse it in water, lava or even fruit juice, and a dumb helper will arise. Different seeds provide fluros of different behaviors. Some are fixated on button pushing, others chase you or seek out light sources, and still others look for liquids matching their constituent mass and slurp them until they burst. Environments often have grills through which only fluros can pass, so much of the game involves working out where to place a fluro such that it moves through a set of switches in the right order while pursuing the appropriate behavioral goal.

It's a nice enough trick, and repeated in many guises with clever complications: lava fluros and water fluros can be coaxed into collisions, activating steam-powered contraptions. Fruit-pulp fluros grow on trees in two flavors—mix them and they detonate. The emphasis on fluid dynamics means occasionally adjusting the angle of a spraying nozzle, or thinking carefully about where you are going to squirt your own canister-supplied hose.

There's often a platforming or timing element to these gentle intellectual challenges, and this is where the game loses its footing a little: movement in this world is awkward, your character's gangly marionette body snagging on some things and sliding off others. The graphics have a stunning gloss, but it doesn't help in differentiating background detail from foreground objects.

Nor are the fluid dynamics, physics and AI reliable enough to deliver satisfyingly even results. Some solutions end up an ugly, frantic fudge, or jeopardized by some random spasm of fluro whim. The swooping, zooming camera doesn't help, often truncating useful information, erasing off-screen fluros from existence, or simply pulling out so far that the game sputters into super slow-motion.

But if *Vessel*'s action is sometimes shabby and erratic, at least the fluid simulation is a real novelty for this genre. Every now and again, those dynamic elements come together to deliver a solution that rivals the "Eureka!" moments of any other puzzler. Despite its occasional chaos and fussy foibles, *Vessel*'s central gimmick just about holds water. ■

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Strange Loop Games ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.strangeloopgames.com

Need to know

What is it?
Puzzle-platformer with flowing liquids and gloopy AI helpers.

Influenced by
Braid, Limbo, PixelJunk Shooter

Play it on
Dual Core 2GHz , 2GB RAM, Radeon HD 2400/GeForce 7600 (Shader Model 3.0)

Alternatively
The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom, 80%

Copy protection
Steam

VERDICT

A novel use of fluids, but sometimes sunk by cumbersome platforming and the annoyingly inconsistent physics.

PC GAMER 72

IMPRESSIVE

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

RAYMAN ORIGINS' perfect platforming schools the competition *by Jon Blyth*

Need to know

What is it?
A slick Flatland platformer.

Influenced by
Rayman, Sonic, Mario

Play it on
Pentium IV 3GHz, Radeon X600XT, DirectX 9.0 sound card

Alternatively
Sonic Generations, 64%

Copy protection
None

"Death isn't punished, and no failure feels unfair"

Having played *Rayman Origins* on the consoles, I'd already fallen in love with its colorful world. So coming to the PC version felt a bit like re-enacting a first date: a stupid but good-natured romantic fiction.

But just as I'm getting ready to go to that pub where we met so I can pretend to come over and offer the PC version of *Rayman Origins* a drink, it turns to me, and lets its dressing gown fall to the floor. I am aghast. There's just a smooth patch of skin where the DRM should be. It's never looked more beautiful.

Apart from that, this is a pixel-perfect port of an inspired and downright wonderful platformer. *Rayman* distinguishes itself and embarrasses the competition with its visual design. The creativity that flushes through every square inch of the canvas makes *Mario* feel like a stage adaptation of a washing machine manual. *Origins* exists comfortably in its two dimensions, the only concession to the third being understated parallax. It makes the hysterical original *Sonic* levels in *Sonic Generations* feel insecure and incoherent.

Everything about the level structure makes *Rayman Origins* intuitive and joyful, and every design decision has been made to test the expert without alienating the beginner. The levels vary from familiar takes on platforming staples—cloud levels and underwater levels—to such oddities as a world based on didgeridoos. Gourmand Land takes food as its theme, effortlessly spinning snowy freezer cabinets and lava levels inside an oven.

Run and Lum

All levels are united by a deceptively simple aim: collect the small number of Electoons. Some will be in hidden areas, others won by collecting the hundreds of yellow Lums. Many of these are within easy reach, others fly out of bubbling platforms, acting as both rewards and signposts. King Lums add a touch of urgency and demand precision, doubling the value of other Lums you collect for a short time. Skull Coins are worth 25 Lums, and require the nimblest fingers and sharpest eye. To master a level, you don't have to collect every Lum, but it's so tight, you'll consider starting again if you miss one.

That's where *Rayman Origins* pulls its friendliest and most compulsive stroke. Each level is split into short checkpointed stages, allowing you to explore, forage and suicide-restart your way across a level. Death isn't punished, and apart from a rude turning circle when negotiating tight underwater levels, no failure feels unfair. You'll never *have* to return to a level later, with your new powers: everything is within grasp on the first playthrough.

The challenges vary. The bridge-crossing levels are low on hazards, but heavy on the speed-testing King Lums. The Mosquito levels transform the action into side-scrolling shoot-'em-ups, which are much more enjoyable when played on a gamepad. The optional Tricky Treasure levels are the toughest, and the only time when the game demands absolute perfection and declines to offer checkpoints. Apart from these levels, any frustration is bite-sized and manageable. There's never a moment when you want to stop playing. With four players playing locally, it becomes enjoyably chaotic, even if the lack of online options is a bit of a lost opportunity.

Aside from a disconcertingly phallic end-of-level sequence that's as unskippable as it is frequent and overlong, everything about *Rayman*'s arrival on PC is slick and joyful. *Origins* is a rare and hefty slab of uncompromised pleasure. ■

Nymphomania

Free these nymphs, learn a new power

RUN UP WALLS!
Up walls, across ceilings

Nymph Helena Handbasket

CHANGE SIZE!
Squeeze and stretch through funnels

Nymph Edith Up

FLY!
Well, sort of. It's gliding, really.

Nymph Holly Luya

DIVE!
And no oxygen meter, either

Nymph Annetta Fish

ATTACK!
Hold for a charged attack

Nymph Betilla

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Ubisoft Montpellier
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 4, local co-op ◆ **Link** raymanorigins.ubi.com ◆ **ESRB** E

VERDICT

A beautifully animated, brilliantly scored, exquisitely judged platformer, equally modern and classic.

PC GAMER 91

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Simple but happy, Globox hangs from ledges by his top lip.

The Mosquito transforms levels into side-scrolling shooters.

Diving—the least lovely levels, but still bloody lovely.

With an oddly sexual thrust of his invisible hips, the day was saved.

Collect this fella's teeth to access the final area.

When Masterchef Attacks.

Globox's size makes him feel more cumbersome underwater.

BEDLAM

REALM OF THE MAD GOD offers all the green numbers you can eat—but at what cost? ***by Chris Thursten***

Need to know

What is it?
Free-to-play roguelike MMO with twin-stick shooter DNA.

Influenced by
Rogue, Robotron

Play it on
2.33GHz CPU, 1GB RAM

Alternatively
Dungeons of Dreadmor, 82%

Copy protection
Steam, Online-only

The Steam release of *Realm of the Mad God* marks a new mainstream focus for the free-to-play browser MMO. It's a combination of *Rogue*, *Robotron* and *Diablo*, an isometric fantasy shooter where quests are handed to you on the fly, where you're never given a reason to stop running, shooting, or farming experience—until you die, and your character is deleted forever.

Mad God knows how rudimentary it is, and the main reason it's enjoyable is that sense of being let in on the joke. It reduces MMO mechanics to the point of absurdity without rejecting them, revelling in the festive pointlessness of haring around with your mates blowing up an improbable number of elves.

Wide-eyed sprites and a looping up-tempo soundtrack contribute to this thrill of being swept up in a tidal wave of manic consumption. Being absorbed into one of *Realm of the Mad God*'s "trains" is something every gamer should experience at least once: a gang of players that reaches a critical mass where no monster can stop it, then tears through the world in a leaderless stampede. Such mechanics would be cynical elsewhere, but when accelerated to the point of ridiculousness they become charming, like listening to a despot give a speech on helium.

It's easy to emerge from one of these trains with a max-level character, and for the committed this is where *Realm of the Mad God* actually begins. Collecting special potions from bosses maxes out your character's stats, enabling you to take on tougher bosses and eventually several variants of the Mad God himself. Then you die, and your character's achievements are counted and served back to you as a "fame" rating tied to your account.

It's a game that's happy to discard your efforts in a heartbeat, and that complicates the inclusion of micro-transactions. Everything you can buy with real money is cosmetic, with the exception of dungeon portals that allow you to skip straight to a specific encounter. The cheaper items—armor dyes that cost a buck or less—are lost with your character, while more expensive unlocks such as pets are permanently bound to your account.

If you rationalize the money you spend as a way of tipping the developers, it makes more sense. You're invited to participate exactly as much as you want, whether that's jumping in for 20 minutes or dedicating yourself to unlocking every class, buying every hat, and killing every god. It's your choice, after all—just don't be surprised if people think you're mad for trying. ■

◆ **Price** Free with real money item store ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Wild Shadow Studio
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** realmofthemadgod.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

VERDICT

An anarchic lo-fi MMO with a refreshing disregard for your s anity. Unrepentantly simplistic and fun.

PC GAMER **80**

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SOFTCORE

SNUGGLE TRUCK swaps tension for toys *by Matt Lees*

A game about steering a rusted truck of hopeful Mexicans through dusty cartoon levels, *Smuggle Truck*'s saccharine cheer only made its subject matter feel more uncomfortable.

Your goal in the remake remains the same: get your truck across the border as quickly as you can, and try not to lose too many passengers along the way. Following political outrage over the original game, however, and a failed submission to Apple's Marketplace, developers Owlchemy decided to try a different tack. As well as trimming off half the crucial consonant, they've replaced your immigrant passengers with fluffy toys.

I'd like to be able to cheer their efforts, but the change is too much of a compromise. In the original game, as a poignant reminder of just how lacking the alternatives were for your passengers, there was a "legal immigration" mode: a room which asked you to sit and wait for 19 years in the hope of eventually getting a green card. Grind the political edge down to dust, and what's left feels painfully cute—a Sesame Street joke that's forgotten its punchline.

The remaining game is remarkably basic: use up and down to control your truck's speed, and left and right to keep it balanced. A level creator and leaderboards add longevity, but that doesn't mean much when the overall package looks and feels like a half-baked port of a iPhone game.

It's not often you see a developer clone its own game, but this oddity its half the entertainment. If you'd rather avoid being being caught with the fuzz, the original is available at www.smuggletruck.com. ■

PC GAMER 45

◆ **Price** $5 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Steam ◆ **Developer** Owlchemy Labs ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.smuggletruck.com ◆ **ESRB** TK

ALIEN INVASION

Set the sky on fire with nostalgic arcade-em-up TITAN ATTACKS! *by Kim Richards*

Take a pinch of *Space Invaders*, a touch of *Galaga*, smear the whole thing with rainbow colours and voila, you have *Titan Attacks!*—a compact, utterly addictive arcade shooter that'll keep you pew-pew-pewing until the arthritis hits.

For those who never experienced the simplistic joy of *Space Invaders*—tiny children and those of you who've paid off the mortgage on the rock you live under—the premise is replicated here. Waves of attackers descend, and you, a single tank that can only move left or right, blast them down while dodging lasers.

Titan Attacks! improves this classic formula with more aliens (including cheap mothership bosses and dive-bombing saucers) and tank upgrades. Finish a wave off, and you can spend the cash you earned on faster guns, screen-demolishing smart bombs and heaven-sent shield refills—that last one being a purchase you will want to plug a lot of dollars into.

Titan Attacks! sticks firmly to it's old-school roots in all aspects: when you game over, it's most definitely game over. Scores are reset to zero, power-ups go bye-bye, and you start back at the very first level. Which is fine, if this challenge is the sort of thing you're looking for. But for the less patient gamer, it is damned frustrating when you make that fatal mistake.

Stick with it, however, and it's as satisfying to blow enemy ships into blocky smithereens as it was for you/your parents/your children (delete as appropriate) in the '70s. It all depends on how long your icy composure can stand up against the dreaded "Game Over" screen. ■

PC GAMER 78

◆ **Price** $5 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Puppy Games ◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.puppygames.net/titan-attacks ◆ **ESRB** NR

PRETTY THE FOO

WAKFU separates paid and free players, presses your nose firmly against the grindstone ***by Richard Cobbett***

Need to know

What is it?
The sequel to older MMO *Dofus*, set a thousand years later in a flooded world. Take down the evil force that led to the world's destruction. Oh, and grind. A lot.

Influenced by
Maple Story

Play it on
2GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB 3D card

Alternatively
Second Life

Copy protection
Steamworks

Mommy, where do monsters come from? In many of *Wakfu*'s gorgeous areas, they're provided by other players. If you casually amble over and kill one for the experience points, as you would in the average MMO, it's gone for good. Or at least until the survivors get a chance to reproduce, or someone else swings by to grow a replacement. *Wakfu* loves this kind of thing. It's an MMO where players control the economy, ecosystem and politics of the world—a world that tries to rope everyone from huge guilds to individual players into playing a part in something bigger than their own story. It's friendlier than *EVE*. It's more of a sandbox than *Warcraft*.

It's so relentlessly grindy, it should come with a mortar and pestle.

Unfortunately, it's also so relentlessly grindy, it should come with a mortar and pestle.

At first, things are cheery enough. *Wakfu* has one of the most beautiful 2D worlds around, and its flooded landscapes drip in endearing French quirkiness. Character classes have names like "Enutrof's Fingers" and "Pandawa's Pint," and all of them are so cute, they practically beg you to reach in and give them a cuddle. In game, it's like wandering an MMO *Bastion*, with beautiful vistas and tongue-in-cheek humor throughout. It's simply a world you'll want to explore.

The combat starts out equally refreshing. Instead of standard hack and slash blow-trading, fights are *Final Fantasy Tactics*-style strategy, played from an isometric viewpoint. Things are kept at a reasonably fast pace by offering bonuses for speedy play, and each character class has plenty of skills to bring to the field. It gives you options, if obviously not as many as in games that give you a whole team to control.

Unfortunately, this is where *Wakfu* first sabotages itself. While it both looks like, and arguably should be free-to-play (it already double-dips with an item store), it's actually subscription based—about $6 a month. If you don't pay, you're limited to the first two areas and cut off from most of the game's features—and that's fine. Less understandable is that subscribers and non-subscribers can't group together, even in shared areas. This is madness, encouraging players to go it alone in the all-important early bits where you should be making friends and getting used to teaming up.

Grouped or not though, the appeal of the main game soon wears off. Technically, Wakfu offers plenty to do. In practice, it feels very empty. There aren't many quests in the traditional sense, for instance, though there are some. In the tutorial area, the floating island of Incarnum, progress is very structured, and there's a hint of more dramatic stuff to come on the evil Mt. Zinit.

Repetitionfu

Once in the main world though, the focus largely switches to more general achievements and tirelessly grinding away on the same enemies for hour after hour. That's not simply to boost your character level either, but the crafting disciplines you need to make any money in the world, and even individual attacks. That there's a more interesting metagame of politics and balancing ecosystems on offer quickly gets buried under all this, especially as everything is so poorly explained that you need a wiki on standby to get a grip on many absolute basics.

As grinds go, *Wakfu* is at least a pretty one—and innovative in many ways, with plenty of potential. You do have to make your own fun though, so look elsewhere if you're not going to get into the political side, or simply aren't a social enough butterfly to avoid going it solo. ■

Phases Of Combat

Get used to this—you'll be doing it a hell of a lot

1. Launch Attack
Most enemies don't initiate

2. Placement Phase
Not many options, but choose carefully

3. Initiative Roll
Hope you go first—it's a big help

4. Player Turn
Use it in 30 seconds or lose it

5. Enemy Turns
Wince at how hard even low-levellers can hit

6. Repeat
From 4 until one of you falls

7. Repeat
From 1 until dead or Level 200

VERDICT

A good-looking grind. Keep an eye on it, though: with enough changes, *Wakfu* could be a colorful strategy MMO worthy of your time.

PC GAMER **58**

◆ **Expect to pay** Free ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ankama ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** www.wakfu.com

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Training dojo? No, just a kung fu panda pagoda.

We meet again, owl.

Ha! Joke's on you! It's not my turn to feel pain!

but kill them

Where are my babies? Come to daddy...

This training camp is a more satisfying world than you find down below.

Every territory has a ruler. Players get to set a few options if put in charge themselves.

The art team did great stuff with the isometric perspective.

A golden, quadrupedal angelic television. Carry on.

KOMPROMISED

MORTAL KOMBAT KOLLECTION

komes kalling to PC ***by Chris Thursten***

I'm not a violent person, but Games for Windows Live makes me want to punch someone in the kidneys. Its presence in the *Mortal Kombat Kollection* is clearly a stroke of genius: what better way to turn a mild-mannered writer into a spine-rending monstrosity? I can't play *Mortal Kombat* until I've updated Live, which means I need to quit the game. I can't quit the game unless I can access the main menu, which I can't do without updating Live. If I Alt-F4 out, the update fails. It's got me on the ropes. "FINISH HIM!"

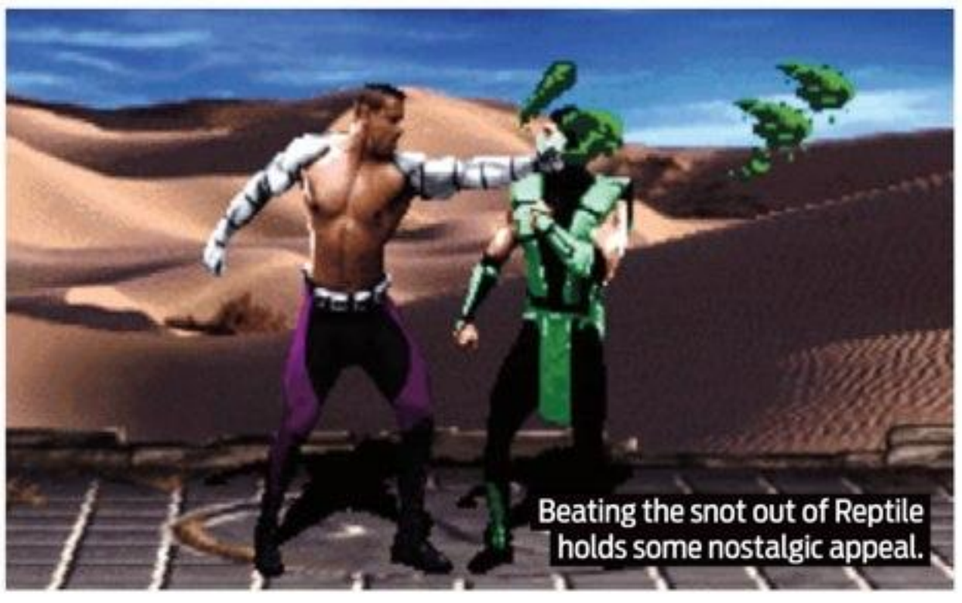
A visit to the Steam forums and a long-winded solution later, here's what you get: faithful recreations of the first three *Mortal Kombat* games, including *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3* and its slew of bonus characters. It's a port of the Xbox Live Arcade/PSN collection from last year, and has nothing to do with the console remake that came out last April. This is a strictly retro affair, albeit with online multiplayer.

It's not a great port, either. The resolution is locked at console defaults, so give up on your dream of seeing the games rendered in full-screen HD. Little has been added, the chief new features being a moves list and the ability to overlay a range of pointless graphical filters to mask the series' aging digitized sprites. If you're a big enough fan then you know what you're up against. Everyone else should be prepared for a rough ride. Just be glad that it can no longer take your pocket money.

Sadly, *MK Kollection* is a serviceable compilation wrapped in a crappy console conversion and a worse-than-usual GfWL implementation. ■

PC GAMER 40

Poster Paint is one of several superfluous graphical filters on offer.


Beating the snot out of Reptile holds some nostalgic appeal.

◆ **Price** $9.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Warner Bros. ◆ **Developer** Other Ocean ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 2 players ◆ **Link** bit.ly/mkkollection ◆ **ESRB** M

ASTRONOUGHT

STARPOINT GEMINI should be thrown out of the airlock ***by Julian Benson***

Placing you in the cockpit of a starship and leaving you to explore the galaxy in the way you wish is a compelling concept. Unfortunately, *Starpoint Gemini* falls far short of its promise. Unstable, unintuitive and empty, the game's unfit for release.

The problems appear early: starting a new game is a matter of chance, sometimes crashing you to the desktop, other times getting caught in an infinite load, and occasionally actually booting.

If you should manage to get the thing to run you are treated to a tedious hour-long tutorial explaining the game's systems. Much like *EVE*, *Gemini* adapts the tropes of the RPG genre to a space setting by replacing skills and talents with ships and technology. However, vital information is either hidden or non-existent. Ship hardpoints, the limited space in which you can install shields and weapons, aren't visible when buying a vessel, so you can spend hours earning credits only to waste them on a ship which is less advanced than the one you already own.

Despite being able to scan enemy ships, it's virtually impossible to distinguish whether you're sizing up a heavily armed warship or a mining vessel. Some enemies will destroy you in a couple of hits, others will barely scratch your shields.

Then there are the game-breaking bugs. Twice mission objectives didn't spawn leaving me unable to continue the main storyline. Another playthough was thwarted by an autosave moments before my ship exploded.

Simply put: unfinished, unpolished. ■

PC GAMER 18

Some games are better enjoyed in screenshots.

ESC pulls up the menu but doesn't close it? Happy flying!

◆ **Price** $24.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Iceberg ◆ **Developer** Little Green Man Games ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.starpointgemini.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

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Kudos: that is actually Ian Kennedy's delivery.

Yep, Aaron Harang is still around.

Think they mo-capped real umpires?

WHIFF

Take "meh" out to the ballgame with MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL 2K12 *by Ryan McCaffrey*

I'll be blunt: as a lifelong gamer and die-hard baseball fan, I'm tired of this series—the PC's only MLB-licensed sim, by the way—being just-good-enough-to-not-completely-suck every year. For *2K12* it's the same annual attempt at Fake Contention™—decent core gameplay systems that perform above replacement-level but will never lead the league in anything. Hitting? Works just fine, though home runs again seem to be at a Deadball-era premium. Fielding is legitimately improved, with new color-coded meters helping you gauge exactly the type of throws you make. And pitching, *2K*'s lone All-Star, returns untouched—fine by me considering how fantastic it plays with an Xbox controller plugged in. Meanwhile, stats abound (yay!), and relevant, if repetitive, audio commentary synchs with the on-field action.

Everywhere else you turn, though, it's excruciatingly average. Though many animations are smooth and a lot of the player faces are dead-on, the overall visuals are, yet again, console-quality, resulting in certain laughably low-res textures and inexcusable framerate drops. Meanwhile, everyone fields like Omar Vizquel, with diving stops and lunging catches rampant. Worst of all, though, are the AI managers. These guys are more clueless than A.J. Hinch (look him up), repeatedly leaving pitchers in to hit during obvious pinch-hitting situations, swapping hurlers mid-count, and making head-scratching pitching changes when they do make the call to the bullpen.

To be clear, *MLB 2K12* is hardly a terrible game. It simply lives the worst fate imaginable for gamers: it's never fantastic, but it also perennially avoids being too terrible to merit blowing up and rebuilding from scratch. ■

PC GAMER **62**

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2K Sports ◆ **Developer** Visual Concepts
◆ **Multiplayer** Two players, locally on same PC or online ◆ **Link** http://2ksports.com/games/mlb2k12 ◆ **ESRB** E

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made, and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★
A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Star Wars: The Old Republic (93%)
March 2012

Unity of Command (84%)
March 2012

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (94%)
February 2012

Minecraft (96%)
February 2012

Deus Ex: Human Revolution —The Missing Link (90%)
January 2012

Orcs Must Die! (90%)
Holiday 2011

Bastion (92%)
December 2011

Limbo (92%)
November 2011

Deus Ex: Human Revolution (94%)
October 2011

Jamestown: Legend of the Lost Colony (90%)
October 2011

REINSTALL

Rayman

CHALLENGING ENOUGH FOR AN ADULT, BUT MADE FOR A YOUNGSTER

by Lucas Sullivan

You'll need to beat up an anthropo-morphic saxophone.

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The things I do to get a checkpoint.

Before party games with the Rabbids or co-op with Globox, *Rayman* was all about one dude: Rayman. No real plot, no gimmicks, no radical 'tude? No problem. In a time when older PC gamers were going ballistic over *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Quake*, *Rayman* reminded us that 2D gameplay and hand-drawn graphics were features to be cherished, not discarded. Without him, I might've never discovered my passion for a genre that had long been confined to consoles, and one that's recently seen a resurrection.

Ray's task in his first game is to rescue cute, spherical thingamajigs called Electoons from the clutches of the dastardly Mr. Dark, who has also made away with something called the Great Protoon. Where might such a subtly-diabolical villain call home? The frosting-filled, cake-covered Candy Chateau, of course.

On the way to Mr. Dark's saccharine cathedral, you'll need to beat up an anthropomorphic saxophone, navigate pitch-black corridors with a firefly on loan from Joe's Diner, and use your helicopter hair to saw through ropes as thick as Hulk Hogan. As Rayman restores the balance, our golden-haired, ascot-wearing protagonist is helped by the magical fairy Betilla, who bestows powers like ledge-grabbing and a glide-enabling gyrocopter moptop.

The places you'll go

Ubisoft's imagination ran rampant during this first *Rayman*, and the payoff is a consistently engaging experience—one where players haven't the slightest inkling as to what awaits them in the next stage. With nary a portly plumber or blue hedgehog in sight, *Rayman* sat down in the vacant throne that would rule over the majestic lands of DOS sidescrolling. It's a game that encapsulates the essence of platformers: feeling bewildered by the challenges set before you, yet empowered and confident that you have what it takes to win.

The limbless, fist-chucking hero feels akin to a DOS-based ambassador, introducing younger generations to the wonderful world of twitch platforming and sporting spritework that looks like a cartoon cel come to life.

And the music—oh my God, the music. *Rayman*'s soundtrack pumped jazzy ditties, pulse-quickening tribal drumming, and serene symphonies out of my dinky speakers in a time when CD-quality audio was still novel and a little alien. Back then, I wondered if my Sound Blaster was relaying transmissions from a higher power. Play any track for a *Rayman* veteran, and they'll lose themselves to a tidal wave of nostalgia syrup. Betilla the Fairy's soothing theme layers glimmering harps, bass, and flutes in a way that feels airy but grounded.

Back in my day

But for a platformer with a presentation and setting that's so enchanting to children, the difficulty is beyond brutal. It's a relic of arcade game restrictions that we've long left in the past (speaking of those, go read Ian Hardingham's column on page 28), when saving your game was a privilege, not a right. Limited continues? Check. Enemies who are too small to hit but big enough to hurt you? Mmhmm. Blind jumps into instant-death spikes? Yup, plenty of them.

Rayman seems to force a kind of selective memory on those who play it: I have no recollection of the game's finicky controls, miniscule field of view, or maddeningly-well-hidden Electoon cages—only of the beautiful backdrops, charming characters, and mesmerizing tunes. It's a wonder how I didn't doom myself to baldness after tearing my own youthful hair out over the raw frustration of Rayman's pitfalls.

Something borrowed, something new

Though Rayman might've moved on to 3D pastures after his debut game (*Rayman Origins* notwithstanding), we still see shades of his original quest in highly praised run-'n'-jumps like *Super Meat Boy* and *Dustforce*. While it's unlikely that Team Meat or Hitbox had the French-made, Muppet-looking

READ ME

RELEASE DATE
1996

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

WHAT WE SAID THEN
"Undoubtedly one of the best arcade-style games for the PC."
June 1996 issue, 83%

GET IT
$6—www.gog.com (as *Rayman Forever*)

VIDEO GUIDE
Rayman 1 walkthrough
http://bit.ly/yb6wMH

TRIVIA
After his fruitful performance on Windows back in April of '96, Rayman's first adventure saw three rereleases on the PC. *Rayman Gold* in 1997 added time trials and a level-creation program entitled *Rayman Designer*. 1999's *Rayman Forever* included all of the above, plus 40 fan-made levels (this is the version sold on GOG). Rayman even got his own cartoon in France, though it lasted a measely four episodes. He's not Ubisoft's only limbless protagonist, either: 1999's *Tonic Trouble* followed a similarly-proportioned purple goofball named Ed in his fight against mutated (and hostile) vegetation.

YOUR PC IN 1994
486 Processor, 8MB RAM, VGA card

MOST HATED ENEMY:
Mr. Skops (seriously—screw that stupid scorpion).

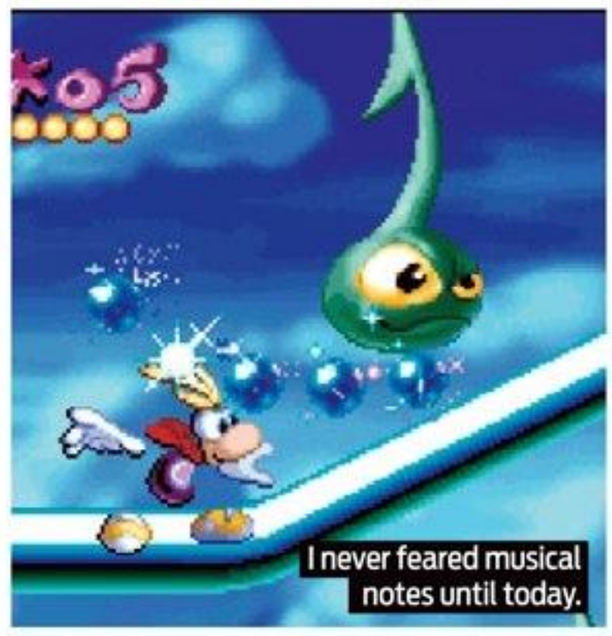
FRIENDLIEST BOSS:
Moskito

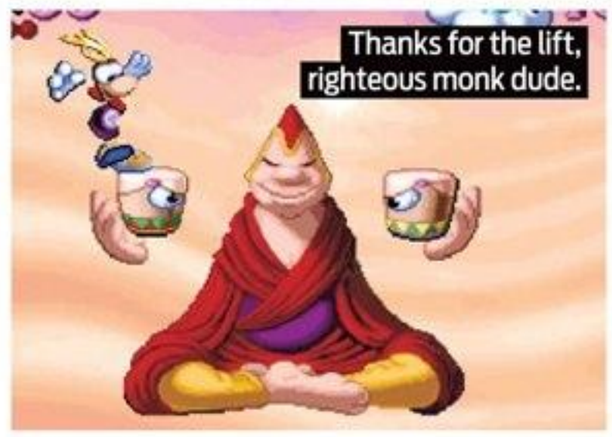
WEIRDEST BADDIE:
Whatever the heck this is.

hero in mind when designing their games, many of the modern games' greatest strengths were already present in *Rayman*. Much like *SMB*, *Rayman*'s classic boss fights revolve around pattern recognition, with a touch of twitch reactions mixed in. The level variety eclipses even the wildly-diverse *SMB* stages—who needs a Hospital or Salt Factory or buzzsaw-filled death caves when you've got the bongo-juggling monks of Gong Heights, or the spiked, bug-eyed Yin-Yangs scattered around Picture City's Eraser Plains?

Playing the game now, it's no wonder that I never defeated Mr. Dark as a lad. Reaching the final boss means freeing every Electoon in every level of every stage. Without online FAQs to guide you through often-invisible, annoying backtracking sections, or knowledge of the infinite lives cheat ("RAYLIVES," by the way), finishing the game is next to impossible. But the journey is far more important than the destination—and *Rayman*'s eye-pleasing, ear-caressing, and charming world will wash away most of the memories of the tough trials it puts you through.

Rayman's found a revitalization via *Origins*, though he seems to have morphed from an cheery champion into a hyperactive wisenheimer with a penchant for ogling buxom fairies. His true beginnings can be found at 640x480 resolution, and whether you're discovering his escapades for the first time, or vaguely recall his treks through the Dream Forest and Band Land, Rayman's domain is one that's still worth visiting. ■





OTHER 1996 GAMES WE ♥

DUKE NUKEM 3D

Chris: They don't make Easter Eggs like they used to. The lack of dynamic lighting and D3D's use of sprite technology make it one of the brightest, most colorful shooters ever.

COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT

Evan: Was anyone else's inexplicable affection for the Soviet Union caused by those cutscenes? The novelty of a skirt-chasing Stalin suits *C&C*'s indulgent sci-fi so well.

DIABLO

Lucas: Blizzard's best single-player game barely makes it in here: it hit on the final day of '96. It's still the surest return on your investment (time and money) in gaming.

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FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB

Don Quixote is back, and this time it's personal.

1 Blitzkrieg

MOD FULLY REINFORCE YOUR *COMPANY OF HEROES*

The amount of new material that *Blitzkrieg* brings to *Company of Heroes* is impressive. It's a realism-themed total conversion for the WWII RTS that adds dozens of new units, new skins for all the existing units, hi-def textures, new sounds, 32 new maps, redesigned command trees and a much more realistic weapon damage system.

The end result: each game is now a much deadlier affair. Infantry in the open are mowed down by machine-gun fire, tanks are ambushed as they drive into villages and artillery tears apart anything caught in its blast radius.

Tank battles are now won or lost on gun size, range, and armor, instead of damage numbers and health bars. This forces you to choose between building the quicker, cheaper tank with the inferior gun or holding out until you can build the better tank.

Balance has changed as well. Axis tanks are generally better armed and armored than their Allied counterparts, but they're also slower, cost more and take longer to produce. This leads to some interesting tactical choices for both sides.

Infantry weapons have had their accuracy, damage and suppression values altered to make them closer to their-real world counterparts. There are risks associated with building specialist units: If your sniper is caught on his own he's probably going to die.

Blitzkrieg places a much greater emphasis on resource management. Everything from firing artillery guns to upgrading your infantry now costs resources, and your resource pools are capped at a certain level, forcing you to carefully consider your priorities. Do you shell that advancing enemy, or upgrade your own infantry's weapons?

Blitzkrieg requires only one of the three *Company of Heroes* titles installed. It works online, comes with its own installer, and even works with Steam versions of the game. The mod is still active, so keep your eyes peeled for more additions in the near future. **EL**

EVAN SAYS...
"Build your opponent a golden bridge to retreat across." Only literally.

SIZE 700MB LINK bit.ly/pcg239-1

2 MOD SKYRIM MINI-MODS

TWEAKS AND CHANGES TO PERFECT YOUR ELDER SCROLLS ADVENTURE

The Steam Workshop makes it easier than ever to fine-tune the already wonderful world of *Skyrim*. Here are a few subtle mods that we're fond of.

Walk
This appropriately-titled mod slightly increases your walking speed to match that of *Skyrim*'s natives. No more sprinting to keep up. *bit.ly/pcg239-2a*

Lighter Dragon Bones
Collecting to make dragon armor? Change the weight of bones and scales to a more reasonable 5 kg. *bit.ly/pcg239-2b*

NPCS Use Ammo
Bugged by NPCs firing infinite arrows from a high vantage point? With this mod, they use up arrows like everyone else. *bit.ly/pcg239-2c*

Open Guard Helmets
Face coverings are weird and antisocial. Make *Skyrim*'s faceless upholders of the law more human with this. *bit.ly/pcg239-2d*

Find more issues at magazinesdownload.com

3 Left 4 Dead 2 Maps

MOD ONCE MORE INTO THE VALLEY OF DEATH WITH YOUR SURVIVING FRIENDS

Playing *Left 4 Dead 2*'s official maps can feel stale by your 100th playthrough. That's where the community comes in. Mappers have been busy constructing new mods and campaigns to refresh your zombie hunt. We've chosen three of the best to help you experience something new. **EL**

Suicide Blitz 2

Scripted sequences and a fully voiced story make this good enough to be compared to Valve's own handiwork. Great set pieces and a superb ending as you exit the stadium.

SIZE 233MB **LINK** bit.ly/pcg239-9a

Silent Hill L4D2

This map brings the classic survival horror setting to *Left 4 Dead*. And then fills it with zombies. Again. See how many references to *Silent Hill* you can spot, and bring a sick bag.

SIZE 598MB **LINK** bit.ly/pcg239-9b

Helm's Deep Reborn

It's Tolkien's most famous last stand, plus guns, minus elves. A winning recipe. The timing of events keeps the adrenaline flowing and ensures you're always on the back foot.

SIZE 58MB **LINK** bit.ly/pcg239-9c

4 MOD

FILOSOFIGHTERS

IT'S THE ARENA OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

This is a Portuguese-made 2D fighting game that pitches philosophers from Plato to Sartre against each other in a tournament that's more about punching faces than stroking chins.

The ostensible intent is to educate you about each thinkers' outlook and legacy, but really it's about enjoying their spectacular—and often spectacularly inappropriate—special moves. Cheer as Marx unleashes a mob of angry proletarians! See Nietzsche drop God's corpse on St. Augustine! **CA**

SIZE Web-based
LINK bit.ly/GQSqN7

5 Co-op

FREEWARE KILL ALIENS AND TEST FRIENDSHIPS

Co-op, if you hadn't guessed, is a game about teamwork. A specific, difficult, and friendship-wrecking form of teamwork: deciding where to go.

You control a pair of spaceships linked by a flexible laser "rope" of limited length. Capturing enemies in the rope kills them, and earns you points in the manner of a twin-stick shooter. Being hit causes you to blow up and tethers your partner to a flaming wreck while you regenerate. Agreeing on a direction and sticking to it is absolutely crucial.

Both players share a keyboard, with one on WASD and another on the arrow keys—so there's no real excuse for miscommunication. But attempting to establish an effective route quickly descends into the kind of "I thought you were leading" arguments that traditionally result when trying to find a bar without a plan on a night out.

A lot of effort has been put into the art style: ships and aliens are hand-drawn scraps of paper and card on a backdrop of cutout planets and stars. It's a simple game at heart, but the high quality of its presentation puts it ahead a few notches. Worth firing up for as long as your relationships can take it. **LS**

SIZE 10.6MB **LINK** bit.ly/pcg239-7

HOW TO...

HAVE MORE FUN WITH YOUR FAVORITE GAMES

Make a *Skyrim* mod

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Moderate

TIME 1 hour

VITAL LINKS:

Creation Kit wiki
www.creationkit.com

Video tutorials
bit.ly/SkyVidTut

More on Quest objectives
bit.ly/PCGSkyQuest

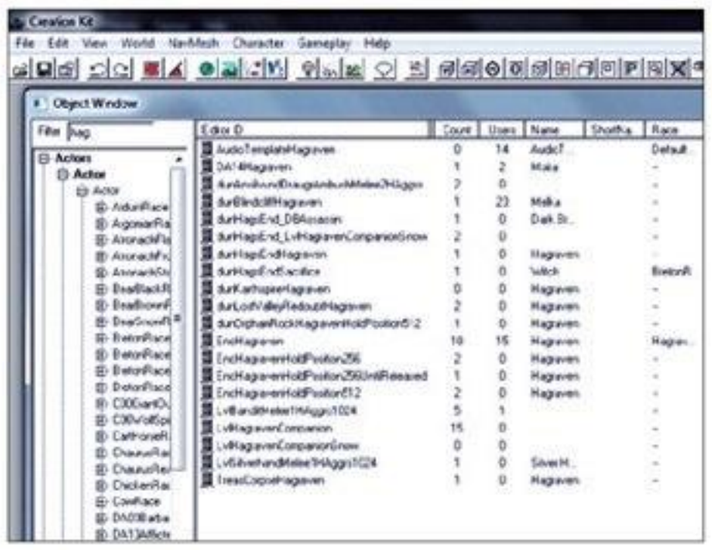
MAKE A GIANT, CRAZY HAGRAVEN AND SHARE IT ON STEAM ***by Tom Francis***

You only need one thing to make a *Skyrim* mod—the Creation Kit. It's the very same world, story, and scripting editor that Bethesda used to make the game, and you can do some amazing and complex things with it. Some of those things are hard. We're going to do something that isn't.

The Creation Kit is free, and if you've got *Skyrim* you've already got it hidden away in your Steam library. Go to your games library, and from the drop-down menu pick Tools. Scroll down to C, for Creation Kit, and install it.

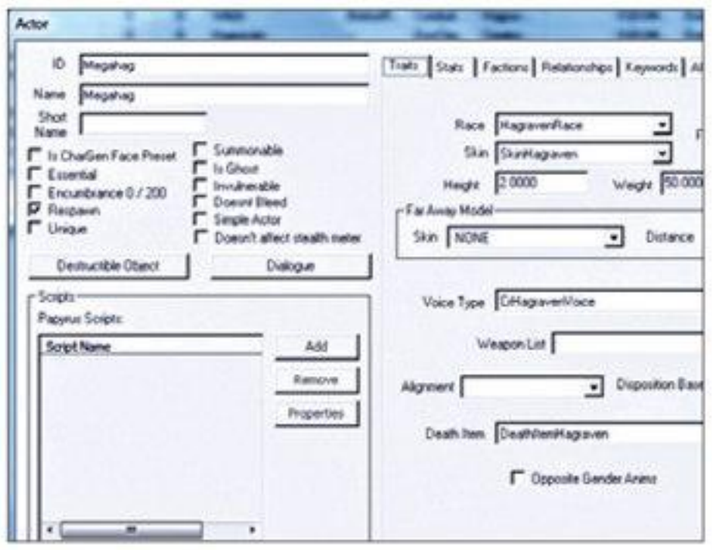
Once the Creation Kit is downloaded, start it up, select Data from the File menu, and double-click Skyrim.esm. That's telling the editor to load in all of *Skyrim*'s data—the world, characters, quests, and so on—so that we can start modifying it. Once we've made our changes, we'll create a new data file for our mod, and the editor will cleverly store our changes in that new file without modifying *Skyrim*'s original game data.

When we're happy with our shiny new mod, we can easily distribute it to the world with Steam Workshop. Exciting, isn't it?



1 Hag it and tag it

Let's create a giant, crazy hag and tell her to kill everyone. In the Object Window (top left), click on Actors, then under that, Actor. The Creation engine calls all people and creatures Actors, like it's all a big performance. Where it says Filter in the top left, type in "hag"—we're looking for the Hagraven, and this will return all Actors with "hag" in their name.

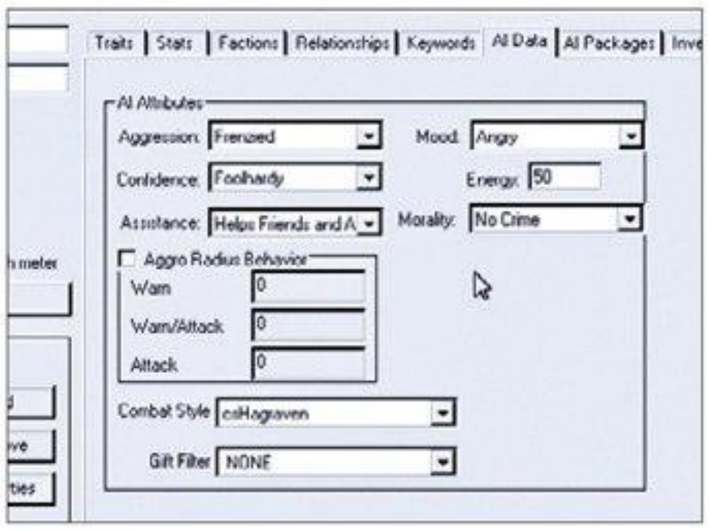


2 A new woman

Double click on EncHagRaven. "Enc" is short for encounter, and Hagravens are horrible old women you sometimes encounter. We're going to make her even more horrible. First, change her ID to tell the editor we're really creating a new type of thing, not editing all Hagravens already in the world. Call her "Megahag," and enter that into the Name field too, so we'll see it in-game.

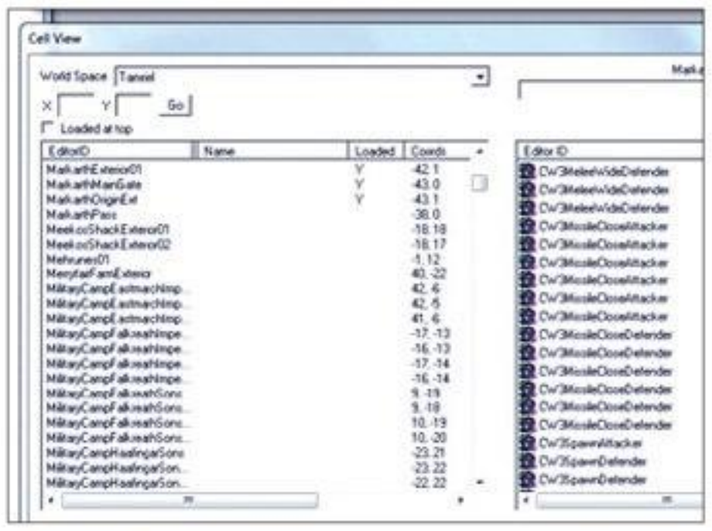
3 Embiggen

Now let's mess with stuff! Uncheck Respawn, and check Unique—our lady is one-of-a-kind. Change her Height to 10—that's ten times normal size. Click the Stats tab and uncheck Auto Calc Stats so we can tweak these manually. Give her 1000 extra health, 200 extra magicka, and click on her Destruction skill in the table, then add 100 to that. She'll be crazy, evil and powerful.



4 Make her crazy

Any time you want to screw with someone's head, you click on their AI Data tab. Aggression? Frenzied! Mood? Angry! Confidence? Foolhardy! Assistance? Helps nobody! To be honest, Hagravens are already most of the way to nuts with the starting values, but it's fun to ramp them all up. We're done for now, so click OK and say yes to the box that pops up.



5 Show her the world

We want to place her in the game now. *Skyrim*'s world is divided into cells, so check out the Cell View in the bottom left. In the drop-down list, find Tamriel: that's the whole outside world. I like Markarth, so let's put her there. Scroll down to MarkarthExterior01, and double-click it. Give it a moment to load and it'll pop up in the game view window.

6 OK what the hell

Looks weird, I know. Click somewhere in the 3D view and press M to turn off Markers—those are the lurid-colored shapes making everything look nuts. Hold shift and move the mouse to look around. If you can't make sense of it, look down and use the mouse wheel to zoom out for a better overview. Holding middle mouse lets you pan with the mouse.

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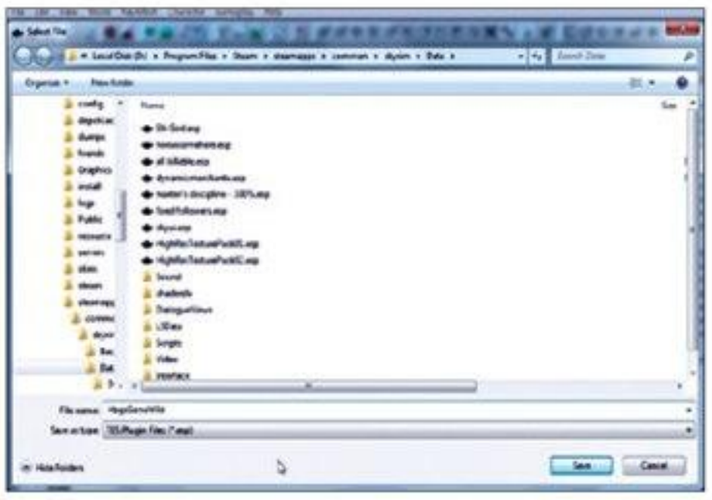
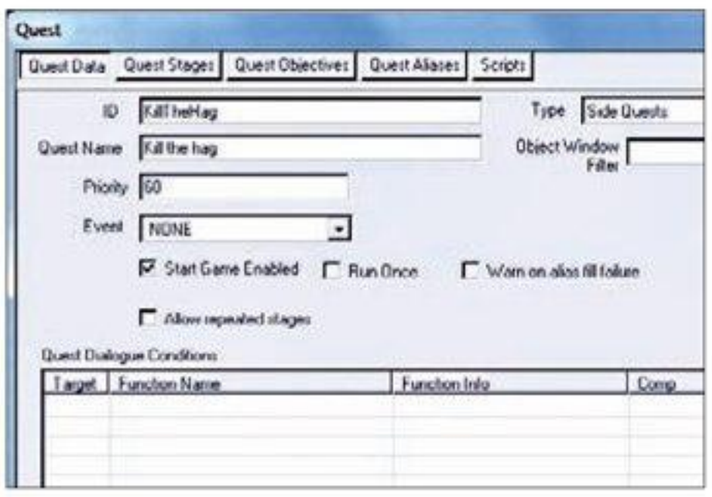


7 Floor her

Once you've got your bearings, find a secluded spot and drag the Megahag from the list on the left to the 3D window. She'll appear where you release the mouse. Press F to align her feet with the floor. Make sure you know the spot you've placed her, as you'll have to find her in-game. Let's save now—call the mod "HagsGoneWild" or whatever.

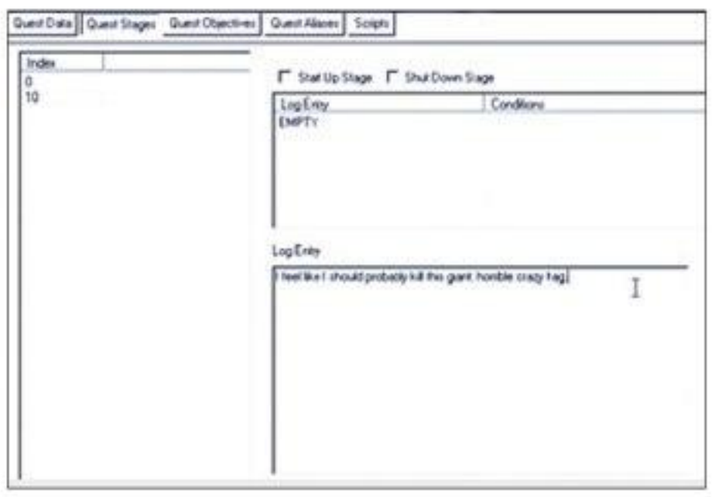
8 Make it so

If you want to check it's all worked so far, close the Creation Kit, then fire up *Skyrim*'s launcher and click Data Files. You should find *Skyrim* has already checked the box next to HagsGoneWild—if not, check it. Then start the game. Fast-travel to Markarth and you should find Megahag wreaking havoc outside the city gates, or unnoticed somewhere nearby.



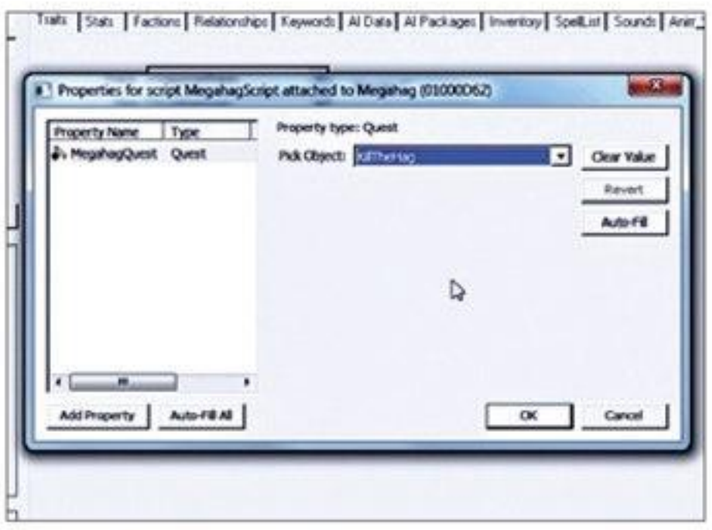
9 Be objective, hag

Let's give the player a reason to tangle with our hag. In the Objects view, click on Characters and then Quests. There'll be a big list of quests on the right—right-click anywhere in that list and choose New. Let's give ours the ID "KillTheHag" and the name "Kill the hag," to keep it simple. Set the priority to 60.



10 This is narrative

In the Stages tab and we'll plot out our quest. To add a stage, right click under Index and hit New. Call the first 0, then add another called 10. Under Log Entry, right click and select New. Type something like "I guess I'll kill a crazy hag, or whatever." Add a new index, call it 20, and make the log entry something like "That felt nice," and check Complete Quest.



11 Link her up

Back to the hag! Open her up in the Object editor, and under Scripts, click Add. Call it "MegahagScript" and hit OK. Select it in the Scripts menu and click Properties. Change the type from Int to Quest, and the name to "MegahagQuest." Once it's added, we can click it and pick the quest from a list—type "kill" to jump to KillTheHag, and choose that.

```
Scriptname MegahagScript extends ObjectReference

Event OnLoad()
      MegahagQuest.SetObjectiveDisplayed(10)
     MegahagQuest.SetStage(10)
EndEvent

Event OnDeath(Actor killer)

      MegahagQuest.SetObjectiveDisplayed(20)
     MegahagQuest.SetStage(20)
EndEvent

Quest Property MegahagQuest  Auto
```

12 Script it

Right click the MegahagScript and select Edit Source. Let's write a script! Type what you see in the shot above. It's basically saying when the hag is loaded—i.e. we're nearby—start the quest, and when the hag is dead, complete the quest. You're done! Save, close the Creation Kit, and try it out in game again to make sure the quest works as intended.

SKILLS

WORKSHOP IT

GET YOUR MOD ON THE STEAM WORKSHOP

1 Bethesda has made it easy to put your mod online for other players to try. You do it from within the Creation Kit—go to File, Upload plugin, and Archive to Steam. Ignore the next screen, just click Pack Files.

2 You've got to fill in some details to explain your mod. It's all pretty straightforward. Take a screenshot of your mod in action, then crop it to be square before selecting it as the thumbnail image here.

3 When you're done, click Upload and your mod will be away almost instantly. There's no approval process, it goes straight up. Go to the Workshop and find the link for My Steam Workshop files—you'll find it there.

BONUS TIP

UPDATE IT

To upload a newer version of your mod later, it's the same process. Say yes to using the same .bsa file, and when the new version goes up, subscribers will automatically get the update.

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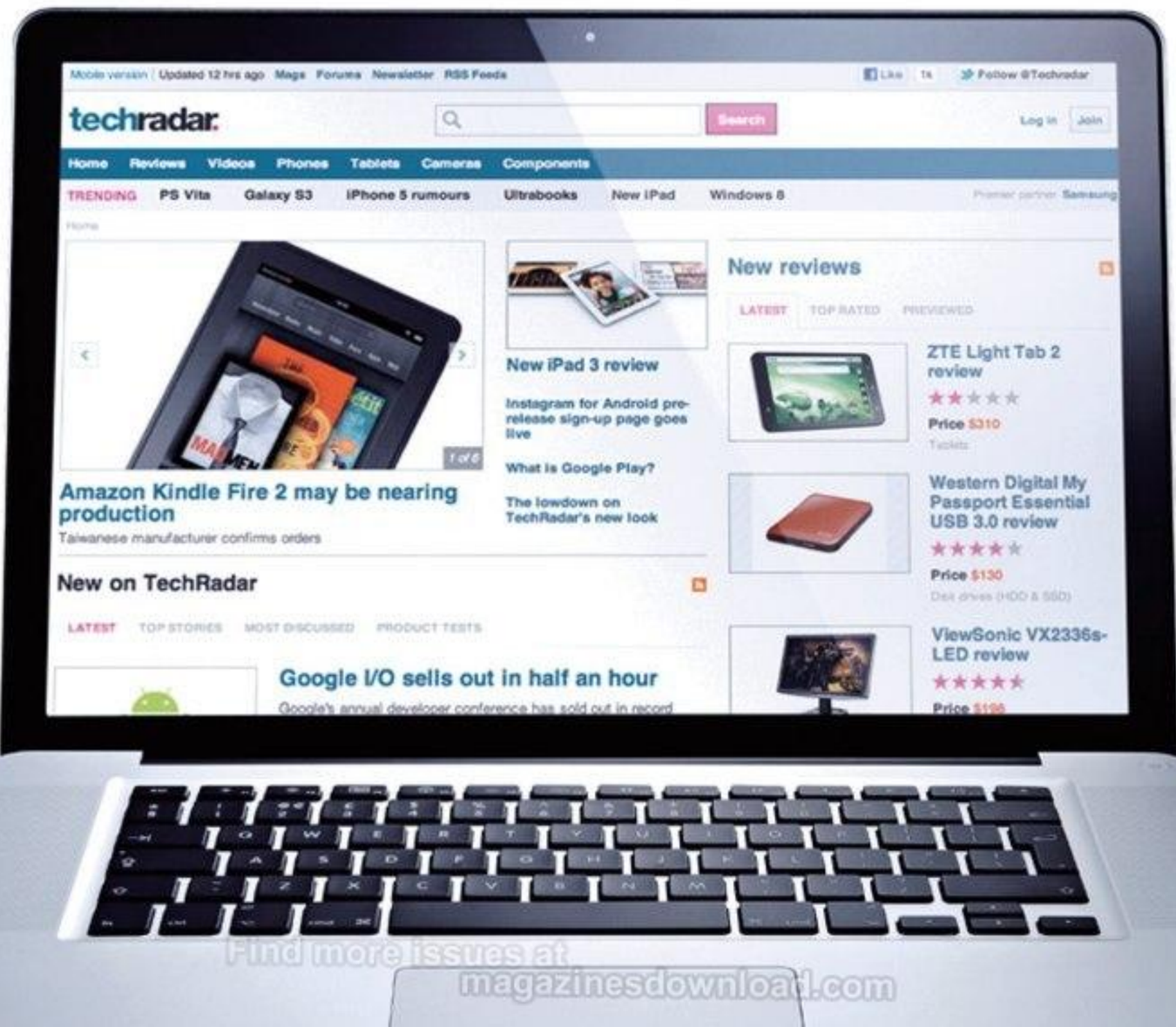

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The Hard

GET THE PC YOUR

TESTED

Timeline M3

Acer

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Let's skip the usual yada yada and clue you in to how frakking cool the Acer Timeline M3 is: It's an Ultrabook that will play *Battlefield 3* on Ultra. Repeat: On Ultra.

With a 15.6-inch screen and a big enough chassis to sport a pop-out DVD drive, the Timeline M3 does stretch the definition of what an Ultrabook is. But it's technically within Intel's definition, and it's the graphics performance that's really outstanding here.

That's delivered by Nvidia's new GeForce GT 640M chip which boasts the graphics performance of what not too long ago took a massive desktop-replacement notebook to accomplish. Are there more powerful mobile GPU's? Certainly. Are there more powerful mobile GPUs that fit into an Ultrabook? Not on this planet.

At 4.4 lbs it plays instead of weighs.

We basically ran everything we could get our hands on the M3 and found the highest settings attainable. The notebook's native resolution of 1366x768 is certainly one of the factors keeping the frame rates up, but it puts games that we were once out of the question on portable machines within reach—and can drive them at much higher resolutions with an external display at home. In either case, you'll of course want to make small nips and tucks to the graphics settings to suit your needs. For example, you can play *BF3* on Ultra, but we prefer the high setting where the notebook will comfortably and consistently belt out 45 to 50 fps.

In addition to the 640M chip, the M3 also packs a dual-core Intel Core i7-2637M, 4GB of DDR3, a fast 256GB SSD, and its Optimus technology lets the GPU power down when not needed. Battery life is rated at eight hours to meet the Ultrabook requirements, but that's in standard use; continuous gaming nets more like a still-impressive four hours of gaming.

Thin, yet devastatingly powerful. Like Bruce Lee.

Is the Timeline M3 flawless? Certainly not. The glossy, low-contrast display is underwhelming, the trackpad positioning is annoying, and there's a bit of fan noise under gaming loads—but we're pretty sure we can live with those problems. We just can't wait to hit the latest chic café in San Francisco, sidle next to someone playing *Angry Ferrets* on his tablet and fire up *Battlefield 3*, *Skyrim* or *Mass Effect 3* so we can say, "Man, that ain't gaming—*this* is gaming." ■ ***Gordon Mah Ung***

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Core i7-2637M ◆ **Memory** 4GB DDR3/1333 ◆ **GPU** GeForce GT 640M plus integrated Intel HD3000 ◆ **Storage** 256GB SSD ◆ **OS** 64-bit OS Windows 7 Home Premium ◆ **OS** 64-bit OS Windows 7 Home Premium ◆ 64-bit OS Windows 7 Home Premium ◆ **STALKER: CoP** 30.2fps ◆ **Unigine 2.5** 20 ◆ **3DMark 11** P1798 ◆ **Dirt 2** 42.1 *Game resolutions are run at native resolution of 1366x768 High to Ultra detail.*

VERDICT

The Timeline M3 gives you truly ultra portable gaming that can run today's most demanding games

PC GAMER **93**

TESTED

Ramrod PC

DV Nation

Newcomer DV Nation's brand isn't as fabled as other boutique PC builders, so for the company's first foray into system building, it decided to offer a feature you can't get anywhere else—a game changer as they say.

In this case, that means using solid-state components to deliver a storage sub-system that's a head-turner in speed. The main drive is a 240GB OCZ RevoDrive 3 Max. Instead of running through the bottle-necked SATA 6 controller, though, the OCZ drive runs in a PCIe slot with up to 1.5GB/s of I/O (that's roughly *three times* the fastest SSD's confined to SATA 6.) But wait, as the commercial says, there's more! If that isn't enough storage speed for you, DV Nation uses additional software caching that increases the speed of drive access in some cases to 5GB/s. Up to 8GB is used to cache the OCZ drive, another 8GB is used to cache the 2TB 7,200rpm drive. That leaves you with 6GB for Windows 7 which, believe it or not, is probably enough for most gamers.

Leave the case door off so everybody knows you're packing 64GB of RAM.

Still not enough? Well, DV Nation sets aside 42GB of the available 64GB of system RAM as a RAM drive that offers full time read/write performance of 5GB and 7GB/s. Data in RAM drives evaporates when the PC is powered down, so software on the Ramrod writes the contents of the RAM drive to the RevoDrive 3 before shutdown and reads it back at startup. This adds a lengthy delay to boots and shutdowns and if there's a power outage before the image is written at shut down (which can be set to update incrementally), it's gone baby.

That's the main problem with the Ramrod PC. While the storage is certainly unique and something to be whistled at, it's an unusual emphasis with an iffy payoff for a gaming rig. And that's not the only issue. The dual-GPU Radeon HD 6990 videocard, while still fast, is decidedly old school. The more current Radeon HD 7970 in the iBuypower system, for example, is faster in some cases. The Radeon HD 6990 is also loud, as in CAPS KEY STUCK DURING GAMING BOUTS LOUD.

The real slap in the face is that despite its dream pricing of nearly $5,000, the machine's interior is outrageously sloppy. Zip ties weren't trimmed down, wires seemed to snake everywhere and the box's rubber grommets had come loose. Oddly, the case's top fans weren't powered up either and the machine also had a missing slot cover under the GPU.

That's too bad, because all the time you save with this rig's unique and insanely fast storage you'll spend worrying about the implications of that inexcusably messy build quality. ■ ***Gordon Mah Ung***

PC GAMER **57**

A little extra craftsmanship would have gone a long way.

$4,999 ◆ www.dvnation.com ◆ Category: Dream

SPEC ◆ Core i7-3930K ◆ 64GB DDR3/1600 ◆ **GPU** ATI Radeon HD 6990 ◆ **Storage** 240GB SSD, 2TB HDD ◆ **OS** Windows 7 Professional ◆ **3DMark 11/Vantage** P10,505/ P38,273 ◆ **Stalker: COP** 62.1/94.4/114.0 ◆ **Far Cry 2** 184.9/218.5/225.89 ◆ **Heaven 2.5** 42.3/68.5/82.5

Game benchmarks are run at 2560x1600, 1920x1200, 1680x1050.

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Erebus GT

iBuypower GT

Last year iBuypower came at us in full force with its monstrous Erebus XL (83%, August 2012) , which was so big that the only way to ship it was by ground and tied to an enormous pallet. Who knows how you even get a beast like that into your gaming cave, but at seven grand you'd probably be able to afford somebody to move it for you. Thankfully, the company scaled back considerably in the slightly smaller Erebus GT that can be shipped by faster means, is much easier to wrangle out of the box, and packs an impressive level of power for gamers for less than $2,500. That's more like it.

Inside is a 3.5GHz Core i7-2700K overclocked to 4.6GHz, 8GB of DDR3/1600 and a custom water-cooled Radeon HD 7970 videocard. You get a 128GB solid-state drive for your OS, a 1TB hard drive for bulk storage, as well as a Blu-ray drive and an 850 watt PSU delivering the juice. With relatively little hardware inside the capacious chassis, the Erebus GT uses just two radiators to handle the heat, and the machine runs fairly quiet and cool with plenty of room inside for air to circulate.

Actually, maybe too much room. You'll really wish you had a second GPU taking up some of that real estate when you put the Erebus GT up against something brawnier. For example, the older, dual-GPU Radeon HD 6990 in the DV Nation Ramrod (facing page) is about 25 percent faster than its newer, single-GPU HD 7970 sibling in the Erebus. In 3DMark Vantage the Erebus GT was about 15 percent slower than the Ramrod. The gaming performance is reversed, however, in *Stalker: Call of Pripyat* and *Far Cry 2*, which saw the Erebus run faster at high resolutions than the Ramrod. But once we get to the tessellation-intensive Heaven 2.5, the Ramrod jumps back in front.

Sleek, dark, and quiet, the Erebus is stealthy as a black cat.

Lots of room for an additional videocard when you're ready. Or two.

The thing to keep in mind with all this back and forth is the staggering price difference between the two: The Erebus GT costs half as much as the Ramrod, and was assembled with the craftsmanship and attention to detail we expect from gaming rig vendors.

It does seem odd that the Erebus ships with such a cavernous case along with a cooling subsystem that borders on overkill. But what seems a mismatch at first could be a boon to gamers who plan on adding a second or even third videocard to their systems or additional storage later on down the line. If that's the case, you'd do well to start with an easy-to-upgrade system like this one: at $2,500 you're getting a fine gaming rig and a lot of value out of the Erebus GT. ■ ***Gordon Mah Ung***

PC GAMER **85**

$2,499 ◆ www.ibuypower.com ◆ Category: Mid

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Core i7-2700K ◆ **MEMORY** 8GB DDR3/1600 ◆ **GPU** ATI Radeon HD 7970 ◆ **Storage** 128GB SSD, 1TB HDD ◆ **OS** Windows 7 Home Premium ◆ **3DMark 11/Vantage** P7,894/P32,345 ◆ **Stalker: COP** 67.9/98.5/114.6 ◆ **Far Cry 2** 198.8/167.7/181.7 ◆ **Heaven 2.5** 35.1/55.3/66.3 *Game benchmarks are run at 2560x1600, 1920x1200, 1680x1050.*

PHOTOS BY DAN FITZPATRICK

MMO7

Mad Catz Cyborg

For years, I've had two mice on my desk. One with ten million buttons for MMOs, another with removable weights and DPI switches for shooters. The MMO7 is the first real attempt at building one top-tier mouse that can shift between genres without missing a shot. It starts by taking the core design of *PC Gamer*'s highest-scoring peripheral of all time, the shooter-ific RAT7 (98%, January 2011) and throwing on enough buttons to keep four hands—or one MMO gamer—busy.

Like its elder cousin, this fierce rodent dons only the finest armor: sturdy, smooth, and boasting 6400 dpi, it's easily the finest-crafted piece of hardware aimed at MMO gamers I've held. The series' trademark customization grants the usual adjustable/swappable body parts, along with goodies like on-the-fly DPI switching and a super smooth thumbwheel.

The legendary precision mode button returns to help you line up those tight shots in a frenzied firefight. But now it's morphed into a "5D" button that also functions as a mini joystick, and it's surrounded by five more buttons on the side of the body to bring the total clicker count up to 15—13 of which I found easy to utilize. Factor in being able to shift between 6 modes and you'll realize there are an absurd number of ability assignments possible on this sucker. For its part, the bundled software is near-perfect, letting you build the right setup for each game without breaking a sweat.

Other than the fairly steep $130 price tag, I only had one major problem with this little guy. The sporadic placement of buttons makes it almost impossible to remember which on-screen ability each button is tied to—especially the different directions on the joystick. By contrast, the Razer Naga's 4x3 button grid is easy to replicate on-screen with most games' action bar systems and refer to in the heat of battle.

It's an understandable compromise between shooter and MMO needs, and if you can overcome that mental hurdle, you'll be rewarded with a jack-of-all-trades weapon that's well-suited for every game you play. ■ ***Josh Augustine***

PC GAMER **88**

$130 ◆ http://www.cyborggaming.com ◆ Category: Dream

Q&A

Dirty, filthy creature!

Q: I've been using a Razer Naga for about four months now and noticed that the bottom of the mouse is getting pretty gross. What's the best way to clean it?

A: *No matter how clean you keep your desk or mousepad, sooner or later the bottom of your mouse will end up caked up with crud. The easiest way to correct the problem is to take a sheet of unused paper out of your printer and set it on your desk. Place your mouse on the sheet and as you apply a bit of pressure, run it back and forth over the paper. The friction should wipe the rubber feet or base of your mouse clean.*

Maintain it as you would a service revolver.

No paper on hand? No problem: Unplug the mouse from your computer and get yourself a damp (not wet!) cloth. Turn your mouse over and gently wipe the offending crud from the bottom of your mouse, taking care not to touch the mouse's optics with the cloth or your finger. If your mouse has collected a lot of filth, you can use your fingernail or a coin to clean it off before going at it with the damp cloth or piece of paper. However tempting it might be, never use a sharp object like a hobby knife or a paperclip to clean around the edges of your mouse's base or rubber feet. Doing so could ruin ruin its plastic or rubber finish and mess with how smoothly it runs across your table or desk.

Hard Stuff Trinity

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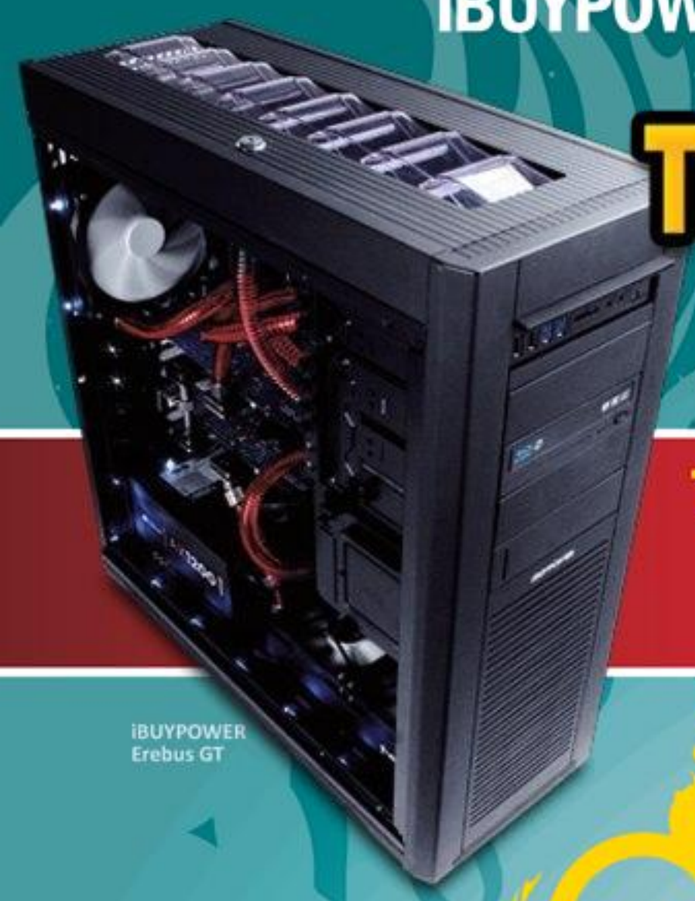

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